



**interzone** NEW SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

# interzone

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*new stories*

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*illustrations*

**Richard Wagner • David Gentry • Steve Hambidge**

*news*

**David Langford's Ansible Link**

*book reviews*

**Book Zone**

*film reviews*

**Nick Lowe's Mutant Popcorn**

**Tony Lee's Laser Fodder**

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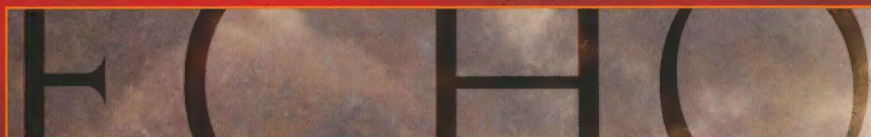
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BABEL II by RICHARD WAGNER (email: [rwagnerenon@att.net](mailto:rwagnerenon@att.net))

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# FEAR INSTITUTE

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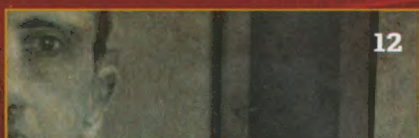
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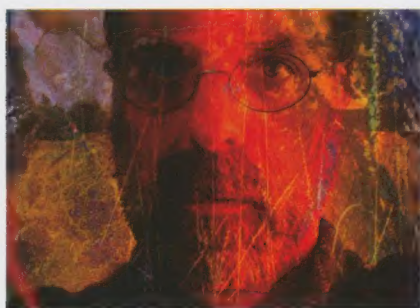


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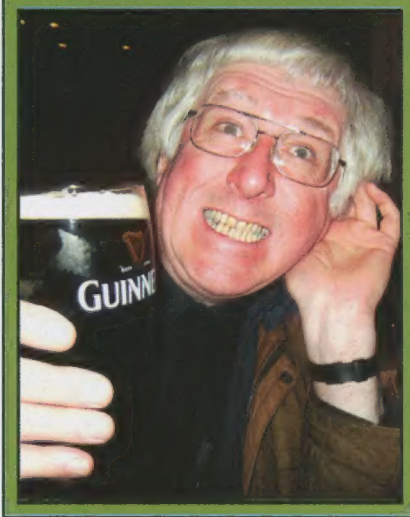
James Worrada's interview with this year's cover artist Richard Wagner (self portrait, above) is now live on our website at [ttopress.com/interzone/specialfeatures/](http://ttopress.com/interzone/specialfeatures/). To quote from Jim's introduction to that interview: "It's become something of a tradition at *Interzone* for one artist to illustrate a year's worth of covers. Adam Tredowski wowed us in 2009, whilst 2010 saw the slow reveal of Warwick Fraser-Coombe's six-part dystopia. Richard Wagner has stepped up to the plate for 2011. Relatively new to *Interzone*, his debut came in issue #229. I recall opening that issue last June and seeing the illustration for Antony Mann's 'Candy Moments' in all its psychotropic glory. I immediately searched for the artist's name. When the illustrator of Jim Hawkins' 'Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark Matter' in the same issue proved to be the same artist, I was very impressed. Though not surprised.

"Wagner's work for *Interzone* evokes the spirit of our nascent decade. Whether the touchscreen-soaked reality of 'Noam Chomsky and the Time Box' (Douglas Lain, #232), or the shock-and-awe of 'Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark Matter', modern themes blend seamlessly with future possibilities. It's impossible to guess where his vision will take us [...] but entirely human to be excited by the prospect."

Special thanks to Richard Wagner for his cover art and illustrations throughout the year, and to his colleagues who have appeared alongside him: Ben Baldwin, Jim Burns, Mark Pexton, David Gentry, Paul Drummond, Russell Morgan, Steve Hambidge, and Martin Hanford. Hopefully we'll see more from them all in 2012.

Talking of which, it's been many years since the last *Interzone* price rise, during which time everything else has gone up considerably, so beginning with #238 in January the cost of single issues and subscriptions will rise slightly, but the latter will be heavily discounted. And don't forget that there is now also the option of a *lifetime* subscription!

## ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD



**As Others See Us.** Salman Rushdie risks another fatwa: 'There was a series called *Game of Thrones* which was very popular here in the United States, a post-Tolkein kind of thing. It was garbage, yet was addictive garbage – because there's lots of violence, all the women take their clothes off all the time, and it's kind of fun. In the end, it's well-produced trash...' (*Haaretz*)

- On the death of Steve Jobs: 'Computers were for geeks, science fiction enthusiasts and others even further beyond the pale.' (Andrew Coyne, *MacLeans* magazine)

**Novel Awards.** *World Fantasy*: Nnedi Okorafor, *Who Fears Death*. *British Fantasy*: Sam Stone, *Demon Dance*. (Also *Black Static* won the magazine category.) Controversy arose since British Fantasy Society chairman David J. Howe had in all innocence stood in for the departed BF awards administrator, whereupon three awards went to his own Telos Publishing and its authors, plus two to his (domestic) partner Sam Stone – who, distressed by subsequent insinuations, returned her novel award.

**Court Circular.** Peter Beagle's long-standing complaint against Granada/ITV for non-payment of film royalties due for

*The Last Unicorn* (1982) was settled at last. Philip K. Dick's estate launched a similar suit about *The Adjustment Bureau*, whose makers decided they don't need to pay anything because Dick's original story 'Adjustment Team' had fallen into the public domain. Harlan Ellison filed suit to block release of the new sf film *In Time* on grounds of substantial alleged borrowing from his 1965 story "Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktockman. Terry Pratchett is suing Paul Bamborough and Camel Productions, who had an option on film rights for his Discworld fantasy *Mort*. He reckons this has now run out. (*Telegraph*)

**James Cameron** explains how Sigourney Weaver's *Avatar* character, though fatally wounded in that film, will return in the sequel: 'No one ever dies in science fiction.' (BBC)

**Klingon Beauty Tips.** After repeated application of a £90+ eyelash serum, 'your lashes will darken and fatten and seem to multiply like trifids.' (*Evening Standard*)

**Magazine Scene.** Terry Martin of *Murky Depths* magazine (slick genre fiction and comics) announced on 25 October that the current issue #18 will be the last.

**Prediction Masterclass.** *Dept of Political Coalitions*: From *Doctor Who* and *The Crusaders* (1965) by David Whitaker: 'No decision was more difficult for Susan or easier for her grandfather [the Doctor], who knew in his heart that she must share her future with David Cameron.'

**Roald Dahl's** family and the Dahl Museum began a public campaign aimed at raising £500,000 to restore the shed – 'the humble but magical hut' – in which the great man wrote his books. Many people felt there must be enough money sloshing around from Dahl's still substantial royalties to cover this expense ('Can't the chocolate factory pay?' – *Independent*), and the unpopular campaign was quickly expunged from the histories.

**The Rich List.** 'Who are the wealthiest film characters?' is a question that apparently torments some people in the small hours. *Total Film* did the sums, adjusted for inflation, and came up with a genre-heavy Top Ten: Adrian Veidt (*Watchmen*) \$74 billion, Richie Rich (*Richie Rich*) \$70bn, Bruce Wayne (*Batman* films) \$30.4bn, Lex Luthor (*Superman* films)

\$29.3bn, Dr Eldon Tyrell (*Blade Runner*) \$25bn, Jabba The Hut (*Return of the Jedi*) \$25bn, Joh Fredersen (*Metropolis*) \$22bn, Tony Stark (*Iron Man* films) \$19.75bn, Willy Wonka (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*) \$19.5bn, Dr Evil (*Austin Powers* films) \$15.9bn. (SFX) A recount is being urgently demanded by Scrooge McDuck.

**For the Record.** Rob Hull of Doncaster made his way into the *Guinness Book of World Records* by amassing the world's largest collection of Daleks: 571 in all shapes and sizes. His wife fondly commented, 'I hate the bloody things and I've got a feeling this is only going to encourage him.' (*Metro*)

**Dave McKean** received an honorary doctorate of design from the University of Wolverhampton on 2 September.

**Connie Willis** won the Heinlein Award for sf or technical nonfiction that inspires human exploration of space.

**Jonathan Mostow**, director of *Surrogates*, offers an interesting insight in the DVD audio commentary: 'If you're gonna make a movie about people staying at home operating surrogate robots, [...] you're going to confront the issue, that you have multiple actors playing the same character. And how does that work? And since no one's ever done it before, we don't know.' What, never...?

**By Any Other Name.** Erik Masting reviewed an sf novel, *2030* by Albert Brook, in the *Times Literary Supplement*. How to describe it in suitably upmarket terms? Aha: 'anticipatory fiction'.

**Fear & Loathing.** Quoting Joss Whedon's *Firefly* is verboten at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, whose Professor Miller decorated his office door with a poster of starship captain Mal declaring (in reply to 'How do I know you won't kill me in my sleep?') his fair-play code: 'You don't know me, son, so let me explain this to you once: If I ever kill you, you'll be awake. You'll be facing me. And you'll be armed.' Campus police removed this in horror, threatening a charge of 'disorderly conduct'. In protest Miller substituted a joke anti-fascism poster – likewise removed, with further threats. The UWS chancellor says: 'This was not an act of censorship. This was an act of sensitivity to and care for our shared community...' (*Huffington Post*)

**Mitchell Gross**, a US author who writes as Mitchell Graham and whose works include a fantasy trilogy beginning with *The Fifth Ring* (2003), is undergoing federal prosecution for allegedly swindling women into investing some \$4.4 million in a fraudulent company. (AOL) Once upon a time, spies report, he bragged at a US convention that he had a multi-million dollar movie deal with Steven Spielberg for his fantasies.

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Artful Alliteration Dept.* 'They told me of the Yagas [...] in the grim city of Yugga, on the rock Yuthla,

by the river Yogh, in the land of Yagg [...] their ruler was a black queen named Yasmeena...' (Robert E. Howard, *Almuric*, 1939 *Weird Tales*; 1964) • *Morning After Dept.* 'She recoiled from herself.' 'But I woke the next morning with a fountain spurting from the pit of my stomach.' (both William Brodrick, *The Sixth Lamentation*, 2003) • *Dept of Anatomy.* 'His thin mustache was neatly placed between a peaked nose and two eyes like black marbles.' (Michael Avallone, *Assassins Don't Die in Bed*, 1968) • *Neat Tricks Dept.* 'Every hair on my body joined those already upright on my neck.' (Kathy Reichs, *Bones to Ashes*, 2007)

## R.I.P.



▲ **Derrick Bell** (1930–2011), US lawyer and civil rights activist whose disturbing sf racial parable 'The Space Traders' (1992) was adapted for TV as a segment of *Cosmic Slop* (1994), died on 5 October. He was 80.

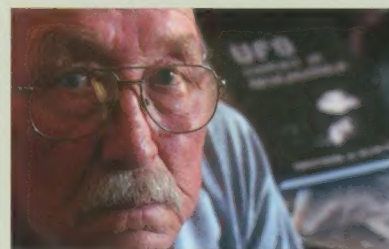
**John Burke** (1922–2011), UK author and anthology editor who began publishing sf with 'Chessboard' (1953 *New Worlds*) and wrote much sf, fantasy and supernatural fiction, died on 20 September; he was 89. He also wrote as J F Burke, Jonathan Burke and – for novelisations like *Moon Zero Two* and *UFO* – Robert Miall.



▲ **Richard Datin** (1929–2011) US model-maker who created the first *Starship Enterprise* and headed the team that built the original *Star Trek*'s eleven-foot version, died on 24 January.

**Sara Douglass** (Sara Mary Warneke, 1957–2011), Australian author of several fantasy series and standalones, whose *BattleAxe* (1995) sold over a million

copies in Australia alone, died from ovarian cancer on 27 September. She was 54.



▲ **Charles Hickson**, US shipyard worker famous for having supposedly been abducted by aliens in 1973, died on 9 September aged 80; his story was one of those incorporated into the dire sf film *Starship Invasions* (1977).



▲ **George Kuchar** (1942–2011), US underground film director, comics artists and teacher who made over 200 films and videos, many of them sf/fantasy 'creature features', died on 6 September; he was 69. His 1975 cartoon biography *H.P. Lovecraft* had mixed reactions from HPL fans.

**Mark W. Worthen** (1962–2011), US horror author (publishing since 1993) and editor of the online magazine *Blood Rose* 1998–2005, died on 19 September.



# THE LAST

# OSAMA

## LAVIE TIDHAR



I was riding through the lowlands, the horse's hooves scattering dry dust into the air. An inflamed red sun hovered on the horizon like a damaged eye, leaking tears of yellow and blue and tendrils of puss-like white clouds. A group of men in the distance were hanging Osama. I stopped my horse on the crest of the hill and looked down. They were too busy, drunk with power and excitement, to notice me.

That was a mistake.

There were around seven of them. They were dressed in torn green clothes, like uniforms. The Osama was between them. They had formed a circle around it. One of them had a rope. He threw the rope over a branch. There was a tree there, it was the only tree for miles. The second time they threw the rope it caught. The Osama was struggling against them – a young specimen, shiny black beard, strength in those wiry arms. They held him down, eventually. Got the noose around his neck. They were too busy to look up, and anyway the sun was setting. I couldn't hear them, I was too far away. I wondered what they were saying, and what language they spoke. They were ill-kempt, their beards grew wild. I imagined the stench of their unshaved bodies. I readied myself. They strung the Osama up and pulled –

I had it in my sight. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, focusing, my finger tightening on the trigger until, with a soft exhalation, I pressed it. The gun fired. The sound of the gunshot was loud in my ears. It travelled fast, but not faster than the bullet.

It hit the rope and cut it. The Osama fell down to the ground. I needed it alive. The men reacted almost comically. They looked around them with bewildered expressions of surprise. I got back on the horse and cantered towards them, the gun at an angle. I didn't hurry, I didn't need to.

They saw me approach. They had no guns or they would have used them already. They just stood there, seven burly, belligerent, tired men, the fight suddenly knocked out of them. They stood almost motionless, the Osama on the ground between them, and they watched me approach.

When I came close I stopped. The men looked at me. None of them made a move. One, the closest to me, regarded me thoughtfully for one long moment then spat on the ground, a long string of juice hitting the earth wetly.

"Move," I said.



None of them did. I showed them my gun. It was usually my winning argument. "Sorry, boys," I said. "He's mine."

Their faces changed. Resentment. Disappointment. I couldn't read their faces, they had been feral for too long. I didn't know if they understood my words. I didn't want to kill them. I hadn't been paid to.

"He's mine," I said again. I touched the butt of the gun for emphasis. Still they wouldn't move. The Osama was motionless on the ground, but I could see it was still breathing.

The man closest to me spoke. "One," he said. I could tell the words came at an effort. "One...man." He looked at his fellows, pointed, as if articulating a difficult proposition. "Si...seven," he said. He sounded proud. "Seven men," he said.

I nodded. Then I showed him my gun again. "One gun," I said. I nodded at him and his fellows. "No gun," I said.

I could see their minds working, it was that slow. Something like a silent communication passed between them.

"One...Osama," the man said at last, speaking for the group. He pointed, vaguely, in the distance, at an easterly direction. "Many...Osama," he said, hopefully.

I shrugged. I was only being paid for this one. "Mine," I said, simply. The man's shoulders slumped.

"Here," I said. I opened my saddle bag. They looked up at me but made no move. I pulled out a packet. I opened it up slowly, showing them. Half a loaf of bread, a lump of hard yellow cheese.

"Food," the man closest to me said. The others echoed him, one after the other, that single word going around in a circle. "Food..." The sun was setting fast. The Osama was breathing quietly on the ground.

I closed the packet and threw it to them. The man closest to me caught it. "Food," he said.

"Go," I said.

He nodded. I nodded too. My head inched at the lying Osama. "Mine," I said.

"Yours," the man closest to me said. I waited. The man shrugged, then spat on the ground again. Then he and his men dispersed, ebbing away from the lying Osama, walking slowly, heading to the setting sun. I waited until they disappeared. I got off my horse and approached the Osama. The gun was pointing at it. It opened bright eyes and looked at me. I couldn't tell what was in his eyes. Hate or bemusement or resignation. Eyes too alien to read. "Turn on your stomach," I said. He didn't move. "Do it!" I kicked him. He rolled over. I grabbed his hands and pulled them behind his back and tied them with the rope that was lying there. The noose was still on the Osama's neck. I tied his legs together. I stuck a piece of cloth in its mouth. Trussed up, I lifted him up. He was light, they were all so light. I put him on the horse, behind the saddle. I climbed on. The horse neighed. I patted it.

We rode on, into the night, me and the horse and the Osama.

The town was called Ninawa. It wasn't much of a town. The buildings lay half-formed, the life had been shelled out of them. An Osama was hanging from a tree as I approached the town. Buildings were burnt and shelled and broken but amidst them some rebuilding effort had taken place, and a major artery had been cleared through the rubble where wooden houses rose

over the old broken concrete. There was an inn and a hand-painted sign showing a man being swallowed by a whale. I rode into town. On wooden porches men watched me uneasily. From the windows of the brothel I could see the curtains twitch. I rode on. I came to the sheriff's place. A single star on the door, and a crude crescent moon beside it. The sheriff came out to greet me. He was a fat man, in a torn military uniform that had once been clean. He spat when he saw me. Chewing tobacco. His teeth were stained.

"This the one?" he said.

I nodded. He didn't look that interested but he came over. He lifted the Osama's shirt and checked and found the mark and nodded, and spat again. I got off the horse and pulled down the Osama and left him in the dirt in front of the sheriff's place. The Osama looked up at me, silently. The sheriff went back into his office and returned with a small leather bag and threw it at me. I heard coins jingle. I caught the bag and put it away. The sheriff opened his mouth to say something then seemed to change his mind. He nodded. I nodded back. I got back on the horse and rode to the inn and tethered the horse there. I went inside and ordered a drink.

The proof copy of *Osama* arrived yesterday morning. I held it in my hands and opened the pages wide and put them against my face, and smelled the pages. They smelled like paper. I wrote the earlier part of this story in Jaffa, but I am now in a place just outside London, in Surrey, and there's a fox on the low rooftop of the garden shed, just standing there, watching. The air is much cooler here, the relentless heat of Jaffa dissipating like it never was. I was here when King's Cross went, E— would have been travelling to work that day but had been out of the city for an interview. My friend S—, also a writer, had come to London that day too, for a conference. He said his plane kept circling in the air, and they weren't told why. When they landed the captain said it was a stormy day out there, and passengers were advised to use umbrellas.

There were three of them and they'd been waiting for me. The bar had a long wooden counter and it was dark inside and it smelled of spilled beer and stale smoke and stale sweat. There was a flag on the wall with too many stars on it. The walls were stone and it was cool inside. There were low wooden tables but only one man sitting down, his back to the wall, his face in the dark. I sat down at the bar and ordered my drink. The man behind the counter had one eye and his hair grew long over the one that was missing. He brought me a beer in a none-too-clean glass. I passed over a couple of coins and he disappeared back into the shadows without comment.

I took a sip from my beer. Then another. I didn't move when a man sat down beside me. Did not look sideways. Took another sip. Waited. Felt his attention on me. I was calculating my next move – swinging the beer glass into his face, breaking it, rising, kicking the stool from under him, pulling out my gun. I took another sip. The bartender didn't come back. The man beside me on the bar said, "We wondered if you had a minute."

I turned my head at that. His hair was cut short, he was greying at the temples. He wore a uniform and his shirt had been recently ironed. There was sweat on his brow. The bar was very

quiet. I heard footsteps and a second man appeared, walking towards us. He was zipping up his pants as he walked.

"This him?" he said, nodding at me.

"We just want to have a chat," the man sat down beside me said, patiently, ignoring the other one. He had a softer accent, I realised. And there was a crown and crossed swords on his badge. "A friendly chat, Mr Longshott."

"This the guy?" The man standing up wiped his hands on his trousers. Looked me up and down. His nails were dirty. "You an Osama sniffer? You catching Os, cowboy? Shit – " He made that last word drawl. "Fucking cowboys," he said.

"A chat, Mr Longshott," said the one with the soft accent, softly. "We have a job we think you're the man for."

I took a sip from my beer. It wasn't a very good beer. I stood, pushing the stool away. The man standing up jumped, just a little. The man sitting down never moved.

I looked at them both. Then I turned around and looked at the third man, the one in the shadows, the one with his back to the wall, sitting on his own at the one occupied table. I nodded, once. He nodded back. I walked over, not hurrying, and the two other men followed me like shadows.

I stopped before the table. The man sitting down pushed a chair towards me with his foot. It scraped loudly against the stone floor. When he moved, leaning towards me, his face came out of shadow and into the light. He had a long face and thick grey hair and he smiled easily and without humour. I knew his face almost as well as I knew Osama's, or my own. Once his face had been everywhere. Recently, not so much. His teeth were white. He said, "Mr Longshott."

I nodded again. "General."

"Please. Sit down."

I sat down. I put my beer mug on the table. The other two men remained standing.

"I'm listening," I said.

"One of our Osamas is missing," the old general said.

In any of the great Vietnam War movies – *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket* – the Vietnamese never speak. This is not their story. It is the story of a war and the soldiers who fight it, against a nameless, voiceless, faceless enemy, an alien enemy. The Vietnamese in those movies are the alien Bugs of *Starship Troopers*. They are without humanity, Charlie-devils in the jungle-hell.

I wrote *Osama* in Laos. In Vientiane, across the Mekong from Thailand. "Why Vientiane?" Joe asks, at the end of the novel. Because it is the middle of nowhere, and everywhere, I could have told him. The setting of another war. It was safe, in Laos, to recall the other incidents, Nairobi and London and Ras-el-Shaitan. To contemplate the war from the other side. US forces have dropped over two million bombs over Laos in the Vietnam War. Kids would go looking for scrap metal and come back without a leg, or an arm.

In Vietnam, they call that war the American War.

I once had a drink on the Mekong with a UN volunteer who specialised in making artificial limbs. His previous posting had been to Afghanistan.

"I'm still listening," I said. The general leaned forward, across the table, his face half-masked by shadows. The man with the soft accent came forward then. He was holding a file in his hands. It was made of rough brown paper. I saw my name written across it in bold black letters, handwritten. *Mike Longshott*.

"Longshott, Mike," he said, that same soft, almost apologetic voice.

The other one, the one with the dirty nails and the bad manners, snorted. "Fucking cowboys," he said, to no one in particular.

"Served with decoration in the second war and again in the third one. Discharged in..." He named a date that meant nothing. "Current occupation, various, but predominantly bounty hunting. Osama captures: fifty-seven."

The man with the dirty nails whistled, sardonically.

"Osama kills," the man with the soft accent continued, ignoring him, "unknown." He coughed, apologetically I thought. "But presumed high. Mr Longshott, you have an impressive record."

I took a sip of beer. Waited him out. No one seemed inclined to talk. I took another sip. The room was very quiet. There was no sign of the bartender. I sighed and put my beer back on the table. "I wasn't a member of the original team," I said. "I wasn't in Abbottabad. I wasn't a part of Neptune Spear."

I felt I was talking too much. I was the only one talking. I saw them exchange glances. I wondered what else my file said. Abbottabad was a long way away, beyond the mountains, and in another time. The compound, helicopters approaching, men dropping, machine guns firing, we stormed up the stairs and there he was, at the top, looking down. He went back into his bedroom and that was deemed a hostile action. When we burst in he was standing behind two veiled women who were trying to protect him. We pushed them aside. Then we shot him, kill shots in the head and chest.

"Mr Longshott." It was the general speaking. "We need a man to go up-river and catch us a son of a bitch."

"What do you need me for?" I said. "You have – " I gestured with my hand, not completing the words. *The remnants of an army*, I thought but didn't say.

He said, "We believe this is not just any Osama."

I remembered the Abbottabad Compound, the gunshots going into his soft body, and the explosion. Like a cloud of insects, rising... I felt a tightness in my chest. The old general nodded. "Play him the tape," he said.

The man with the soft accent put a device down on the table. He pressed a button and a voice came out of it, disembodied. I felt a shiver run through me when I heard his voice. I had forgotten it, or hoped I had.

"We fight because we are free men who don't sleep under oppression."

There was a scratchy quality to the recording. His voice never wavered. "No one except a dumb thief plays with the security of others and then makes himself believe he will be secure – "

The man with the soft accent pressed a button and there was a sped-up sound and then he pressed a button again and Osama's voice resolved again, somewhere else in the speech, some terrible recollection, and he said, "Blood and severed limbs, women and children sprawled everywhere. Houses destroyed

along with their occupants and high rises demolished over their residents, rockets raining down – ” The man with the soft accent pressed another button and the silence returned.

“You will travel up the Euphrates,” the old general said. “You will locate the Osama and you will destroy it. All of it.”

“Blood and severed limbs, women and children sprawled everywhere. Houses destroyed along with their occupants and high rises demolished over their residents, rockets raining down.” He wasn’t talking about Al-Qaeda, he was talking about an American-aided Israeli invasion of Lebanon, one that he witnessed. My dad fought in that war, that invasion.

It is so quiet here, in the room overlooking the garden, with the sun out, and the radio playing in the background. Here in an England whose people cheerfully divided up the Middle East and went to war in Afghanistan and Iraq and who genuinely had no idea as to why they were being attacked. Outside women in burqas walk their children to school and their white neighbours complain in low voices about immigrants, and *those Muslims, and how can they treat their women this way and they should go back to where they came from* – to the places we bomb. The places we continue to bomb.

Osama comes out in two months. And I am hoping to finally put an end to it, this occupation of my life, this invasion of my mind. I remember Nairobi, the Hilltop Hotel on Ngirima Road, the narrow bed we lay on, the terrorists a floor below. I remember the shell of the American embassy, the ring of soldiers surrounding it, uselessly, now. I could not not write *Osama*. Not with the ghosts, and their whispers in my ears.

A day’s ride out of Ninawa and I was alone, alone under the stars. The river came into view. It was not the same river. The river was life. You say Euphrates, but it was not Euphrates, not exactly, not since the world changed, not since they picked it up like a toy and shook it, shook it hard until it fell sideways and into pieces and when it was formed again it was different. There were high mountains in the distance, and beyond those mountains there was nothing any more, not since the Compound, not since the spores. “You’ll be going into the wild lands,” the man with the dirty fingernails told me. We were outside. My meeting with the old general had been concluded. “The lands where the wild Osamas are.” He laughed without humour, hawked on the ground. “Bring us the head of Prince Osama,” he said. He looked at me and shook his head. “Fucking cowboys,” he said, compassionately.

I left him there and felt his eyes on my back as I rode out of town. As I left I saw them hauling the Osama I’d caught up on the gallows.

I made a fire by the bank of the river and watched the stars. The Euphrates was dirty-brown and the water running fast. The wild lands, the man with the dirty fingernails said. But everywhere was the wild lands now. I slept and in my dreams I was back up those stairs, and bursting through the closed door of his bedroom, pushing aside the veiled women, and then I was pressing the trigger, once, twice, three times, bullets hitting soft flesh, chest and then head, and then the explosion. They were still running the war in the world, the world was war, and the

old Euphrates travelled in and out of space and time, it travelled through Uruk and Avagana, it was everywhere and nowhere and he was at the end of it, they told me but it couldn’t be right. Osama Prime.

When I woke up it was early morning. I saddled up and rode again, the sun low on the horizon, climbing, like a beetle, climbing.

As I travelled the landscape changed. Low hills, occasional settlements. I skirted the villages. There were men in the world and the things that had once been men, and there were Osamas. Several times I saw fresh tracks. Wild Osamas. I kept thinking of his voice on that tape. “You were a soldier,” the man with the soft accent told me, before I left. “But this is no job for a soldier.”

I followed the river. Seagulls cried overhead. Several times I smelled smoke, cooking fires. Twice I came across the bodies of men. They had been torn apart. I waited, but when the attack came it still caught me by surprise.

They came out of the water. Their skin was a grey-green, like a diver’s suit. Their hands extended into flippers or claws or human fingers, depending. They rose out of the water and the water fell from them. They had once been human, perhaps they still considered themselves so. I shot the first one in the gut and he dropped, flopping on the ground. Seal-men. The others were upon me then. They shed remnants of their humanity like skin. They clubbed me like seals. They bit into my skin, tore chunks of flesh from my arms and thighs. I shot another one and the shot went through his skull and I kicked out at another, uselessly: they were heavy and slippery on the ground there in the night under a crescent moon.

When the world changed and compressed and all there was was war, the moon, too, changed. It had stopped shape-shifting. It was a war moon, a constant moon, a crescent moon. I tried to fight but they were too many and I felt myself growing weak. The irony of dying like this made a laugh like a cough work its way out of my bruised lungs. I fell under their weight. I was doing knife-work now, cutting through blubber, trying to reach vital organs, trying to take as many of them with me as I could before I went.

Then there was a terrible, high keening noise. It cut through the air and for a moment I thought it was the sound of my death, the sound of a heart, stopping. Then a tearing barking noise and the seal-people fell back. I turned, I was on my back, I wiped blood from my eyes, the weight on my chest had gone and I felt lighter. I blinked in the light of the moon. A wild Osama was standing above me.

It was an old Osama. An Osama having gone through all the life-stages of an Osama. His beard was white and his turban was dirty-grey. His skin was wrinkled, his lips bloodless, but his eyes were still the Osama eyes, that clear, penetrating gaze. The seal-folk moved away from it. They growled but if they had language, they had forgotten it. The ancient Osama advanced on them, his feet bare on the ground. I turned my head, and saw.

Behind him, ringing me in a half-circle like a moon.

A pack of wild Osamas.

There were Osama brats, half-naked, with bare, hairless cheeks, and cheeky grins, and young Osamas, student-like and studious, and militant Osamas, post-desert, with that hungry look, and cave-Osamas with that hunted look about them. No wonder the seal-men turned back. They oozed into the water, cursing wordlessly, bereft of language. We were all bereft of language, those of us who were left, I thought. I felt a little shaky. The Osamas approached me, cautiously. I could see them sniffing the air. You had to be cautious if you were an Osama in the wild. There were trappers out there, villagers, military remnants, bounty hunters like myself. It was a hostile world to be in, for an Osama.

I didn't know what they'd do. I had seen them tear a man apart before. Wordlessly, they stared at me. Then the old one, the leader, keened again. There was a sense of loss and pride in that sound, but something else, too, that I did not understand at the time. A sound like victory. Then they turned away, the whole base camp of them, and left, just like that.

I was left lying there, on the bank of the Euphrates, staring after the departing Osamas. After a while I sat up. My ribs hurt. I crawled to the water's edge and drank, though the water was filthy.

I plucked 'Mike Longshott' out of the moulding Hebrew pulp novels of the sixties and seventies. He was a composite being, a man who did not really exist. Longshott wrote soft core pornography, tales of Nazi concentration camps where prisoners were abused, physically and sexually, by Aryan goddesses, sadistic nymphomaniacs of the Third Reich.

He was a pen-name broke young writers hid behind for cash. He was a collective, burrowing into the sexual and social taboos of his era. He wrote crap, was paid crap, and his books, sold under the counter, went from hand to hand and bathroom to bathroom, their covers featuring naked flesh and whips, guard posts and POW slaves and a plethora of large improbable breasts. He never lived, he never breathed, his prose was eminently forgettable. He was a hack, a pulpster, a paperback writer. His name was Mike Longshott and he was going to be my hero.

I was on a boat, and my wounds had been bandaged. I was on a dhow, and the sail was pushing us, up or down river I couldn't tell. But I could smell the wildlands, the Osama-lands, and I knew I was getting closer. I opened my eyes. A man was looking down on me. I blinked and then I knew why I felt so well, in the bandages, as if some medical professional from the days we still had those had taken care of me.

I looked up at the man and he looked down at me without expression. His mouth was a scar. Scratch that. His whole face was a map of scars. I sat up, despite the pain. They had fed me some sort of pain killer, I thought. Not the type that came in capsules, we didn't have those any more, pain had been allowed to flower a long time ago. Some sort of plant, making me thick-headed and woozy and strangely happy. The man was almost naked, and each and every inch of him was covered in scars. Some were old and scabbed over. Some were new and still bleeding.

I tried to speak. My mouth was raw, as if I'd swallowed razor blades. "Where are you taking me?"

He looked at me. One of his eyes was missing. He drew a knife and calmly cut himself, above the left nipple, a long slow trail, the end of the point sharp, drawing a long line of blood on his wounded skin. He sucked in his breath, like a prayer. "Ahhh..."

"Wherever you want to go," another voice said. I turned my head. An older version of the same man sat in the front, watching the water. All but naked, deeply scarred. We were all deeply scarred, I thought, but some of us had taken it to a whole new level.

I sank back on my mattress, there on the deck, under the stars.

Scarrists, I thought.

I'd been picked up by Scarrists.

Mr Scar was at the helm. He looked nineteen. Mr Scar was handling the sail. He was the oldest one of them, a drawling accent and the remains of a tattered uniform still on his puckered skin.

Mr Scar was the chief, he ran this boat.

Mr Scar was the machine gunner, he was the one who never spoke.

I had time to recover, on the boat. You never got off the boat. The Scarrists had everything they needed right there. They had their knives and their bandages and their lotus flowers, and the thick paste they made out of them. The river was thick like oil. It was sluggish like blood. The deck of the boat was covered in old stains. When I stood up at the rails I saw the landscape shifting past the boat. The sun was always setting. It was red and pussing like a sore. The mountains looked crudely-drawn in the distance. Sometimes I could smell smoke. Sometimes, in a great distance, I could hear their calls, the last song of the Osamas.

But with each passing mile they were growing closer. I could feel them coming closer.

I could feel his nearness, too. His, most of all.

Bin Laden, Osama.

Born March 10, 1957 in the old count, to his father's tenth wife. His mother divorced. He lived with her and her new husband and their four children. Inherited almost \$30 million from the family's fortunes. At university, studied economics and business administration. He wrote poetry, and was a fan of Arsenal football club. Married in 1974, again in 1983, 1985, 1987 and 2000. Fathered 20 to 26 children. Fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan, then ran a campaign against the House of Saud. Established base in Sudan. Expelled following failed assassination of Egyptian president. In 1996 declared war on the United States. Returned to Afghanistan. Has been in hiding since September 11, 2001. Located and executed at the Abbottabad Compound, in Eastern Pakistan, ten years later in 2011.

I stared at his dossier. Old dates, old names for places we no longer had. They hurt, they felt like scars on the tongue.

We never caught him. Abbottabad had been the source, it was where it had started. The days on the river floated by. Mr

Scar ran the boat with silent command. They weren't bad, the Scarrists, they just had nowhere else to go. None of us had. The river ran and I remembered, I remembered Abbottabad.

I remembered running up those stairs, the orders had been clear enough, he'd have to work pretty damn hard to get out of there alive, he was at the top of the stairs, I pushed in, he retreated into the bedroom, the women trying to protect him, screaming, I pushed them, I put the bullets in him, in his chest and head.

A soft, popping sound...

Time seemed to slow. He exploded not in blood and bones and brain but like a pillow, bursting open. It was silent. Things that were not feathers came out of him. He disintegrated as I watched, helpless. The women turned their heads.

So pretty... They floated in the room, these things like feathers which were not feathers. Soft, almost weightless. So much of them. The windows had been open and they floated out, and I followed them with my eyes. One tickled my nose and I sneezed –

Time sped up, but still it was so silent there, I heard someone break the silence with a "What the *fuck!*" and I turned, I don't know why, I don't know why even today I don't know why I was the only one who wasn't affected, I didn't –

I turned and saw M—, he was an officer, I saw the first of the – they were not feathers, they were not, they were –

Spores, and I saw the first of the spores float through the air – so pretty! – and come to land, gently, so gently, like a whispered kiss, on M—'s forehead –

It seemed to *dissolve* –

It was absorbed into M—'s *skin*.

It went *inside* of him.

For a moment nothing happened. He opened his mouth, to speak, perhaps to say "What the *fuck!*" again, but his lips were changing and only a soft exhalation came out of his mouth and a rash began to grow on his face, on his skin, and it took me a long moment to realise it was a thick, black beard.

I woke up screaming in the night. Hands held me down. A sickle moon looked down on the boat. Never get off the boat, only I would have to, I had no place here, no place anywhere. "Take it," a voice whispered, close by, "take it." I stared at the knife. I took it from him. I ran it, gently, gently like a shiver, down my arm, and blood welled out.

"There..." the voice said. It was Mr Scar, the old one. "There..."

A peace came upon me. They bandaged me, and gave me poppy juice, and I slept, and woke up with a new, fresh scar.

There are memories smudged into the brain, as if a child, clumsy with finger paints, had left sticky finger marks and traces of Guasch crammed inside the cranium, into places it is impossible to erase them from. This is Nairobi for me, the American embassy a blackened shell of a building, the soldiers surrounding it. I remember the Hilltop Hotel where we stayed alongside those hidden Al-Qaeda operatives, the dimness of the rooms, the quiet. Outside dust motes hovered in the still air, shoe shiners sat in the shade waiting for custom, they were selling

scratch cards from a booth and I bought several, we walked in the dark to an Indian restaurant where we were the only customers, a hush had settled over the city, the spirits of the dead wafted upon the waters.

The Sinai in 2004, E— on the beach, the sun had set and it was dark, quiet, a fire was burning nearby, in the kitchen a young Bedouin was roasting a chicken, someone was smoking a joint, the smell of it rose in the air, the beating of the Red Sea against the sand –

BOOM!

Like a comic book explosion, exclamation marks rising from it like flying darts –

KABOOM! POW!

The car bomb exploded just further up the beach, in Ras-el-Shaitan, driven into a camp identical to the one E— was staying at, reed shacks on the beach, stoned backpackers, mosquito-nets and mosquitoes –

The screams rose into the night air, E— did not know what to do, she watched the flames, we were apart, I couldn't phone, the news was jumbled, no one knew who had lived and who had died, a random person phoning, heard from someone who'd heard from someone who was there, E— is all right, please phone C—, a stranger, and tell them their friend is alive, too –

The spirits of the dead coagulated, restless, amassing now, more and more of them, and E— passing through King's Cross to work when the bombers struck, but she had been away that day, could not get back into the city, we spoke on the phone and watched the news on the television –

And E—'s friend L—, who worked with her in Laos, a fellow aid worker, they would not renew her visa so she went back to Afghanistan, she had loved it there, kidnapped and then a rescue attempt, US forces storming the camp where she was held, killing her with one of their own grenades –

KABLOOEY! BAM!

Cartoon war with a cartoon president reading a story about a goat, and a cartoon villain muttering threats into a camera, mutual ghost-gatherers, God-botherers, and we were fodder for their hate.

"We don't go any farther," Mr Scar told me. Ahead of us the river curved and I could see a village on the point, smoke rising. The sick moon, the sickle moon, hung above our heads like a scar carved into the sky.

"Why?" I said.

He shrugged. "It's hairy out there," he said. He pointed. "That's Osama's point."

"Osama don't surf!" I said, but he just shook his head at that, perhaps remembering a time we had cinemas and movies, a door into escape. One by one the doors had shut, and we who remained were trapped here, in this new Osamaworld.

"This war..." I began to say, but he stopped me, with a gentle smile, a smile like a scar, and a hand on my shoulder, and he said, "The war is already over. It was over a long time ago."

I watched the boat sail back. I was left alone on the bank. I had no horse. The seal-folk killed my horse and his blood ran red into the brown river. I walked. I followed the river, remembering.

The spores rose into the air that night. They hovered over houses and rooftops and were blown far and wide by the winds.

I saw the men – I saw my friends – I saw them change. I saw the beards creep up along their naked chins, I saw their smooth-skinned arms fill with wrinkles, and saw their eyes change, saw the look in them become a penetrating gaze, their lips thinned, they spoke in tongues, they said:

“Security is an indispensable pillar of human life – ”

“Free men do not forfeit their security – ”

“Just as you lay waste to our nation. So shall we lay waste to yours – ”

“Does the crocodile understand a conversation that doesn’t include a weapon?”

And so on. I saw them reach for weapons. I saw them look at me. They shot down the helicopters and the men, dying, were transformed when the spores hit them.

I ran. Somehow I was not affected. I was not Osamaed. I ran and they followed, the first of the wild hunt, the Osama-spawn, they hunted me and each one I killed exploded in a soft cloud of spores that rose and rose and then fell, softly, drifting in through open windows, settling on the faces of sleeping women and men, transforming them.

They hunted me through the long night and the world contracted and changed, we lost the war that day, we were lost that day, and I lost them in the mountains and hid in the deep black caves.

I walked through the night. Nothing troubled me. The world was a quieter world nowadays. The remnants of men and their army still congregated together in what was left of the cities, places like Ninawa and Caubul and Nuyok, and hunted and kept away the wild Osamas. But out here, in the wildlands, men were few and far between. I walked and the river followed me, until I came to the place.

They called it, simply, the base. Al-Qaeda: the base. There were low buildings and a fence, trees growing there. The river flowed nearby and it was in the shadow of the mountains. Osamas of varying shapes and sizes watched me mutely. I saw a human corpse dangling from a rope and a sign on its chest in childish white letters that said *Sorry*.

My bare feet sank in the mud. My beard had grown in my days on the boat. The silent Osamas watched me. A raven screeched high above.

I walked through the valley of the shadow of death and I felt no fear and the stars were bright overhead. I came to a hill and I walked up it and I reached him. He was sitting on a folding chair, watching me. He was very old. A jester at his feet, a man who was not Osamaed, in the remnants of a military uniform, with no insignia. He smiled a manic grin and chattered at me. “The poppy fields are beautiful, red like the blood of martyrs.”

He had a high trembling voice. He said, “God lives in the clouds like smoke, he has a long grey beard.”

The man sitting on the folding chair turned his gaze on him and the jester scampered down the hill.

The man turned his gaze on me. His eyes were rheumy but still somehow sharp. Almost, I fancied that he smiled.

“You have come to kill me,” he stated.

“I have come to...” My voice sounded different in my ears. The man in the folding chair had a long beard turned white with age. “You have tried before and you have tried many times,” he said, not unkindly, “but do you not see? Killing the man is not enough. A man is more than flesh and gristle and bone and blood. Kill the man and all you do is preserve the image of the man. His ikon. Kill a man and a thousand spores of faith and belief, a thousand spores of ideas erupt into the world. Look,” he said. He reached his hand towards me. I took it in mine. Our hands were the same. I raised my free hand to my beard and he did likewise, to his. “We are not so unlike, you and I.”

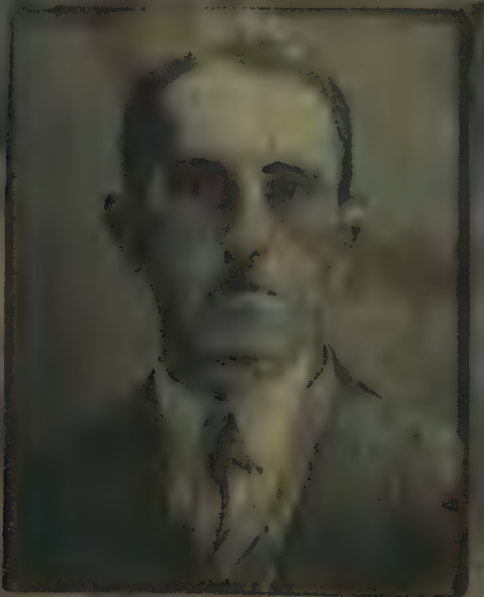
I was running up the stairs and he was at the top. He had backed into his bedroom. I burst through the door and the women were screaming, they were trying to shield him with their bodies. I pushed them away. The gun was in my hand and I used it, firing bullets at point-blank range into his chest and then his head, confirmation kill, eliminating with extreme prejudice.

I fired into silence and a cloud of spores rose into the air, like ideas that wouldn’t die, and the world was quieted, with a sound like the hiss of escaping air.

Osama and Osama and Osama, amen.

Lavie Tidhar does not exist. His novel, *Osama*, is now out from PS Publishing ([pspublishing.co.uk](http://pspublishing.co.uk)).





# ERASING THE CONCEPT OF 2EX FROM A PHOTOBOOTH

## SAYING NO AT THE KEY PARTY

If we had stayed for the second half of the Elkind's party, if I'd been willing to swap after the art director's young wife danced for us by the lime green vinyl sofa, her bare feet making impressions on the orange carpet, then I never would have painted over the snapshots from the photobooth. If I'd given it a shot with her it might have turned out differently, and I'd wanted to do it. The way the director's wife moved to the acoustic cover of some old 80s pop song, the sight of her in a white blouse that reflected the red and yellow light coming from the open window, the way she parted her auburn hair on the side, these things made total indifference impossible.

Later, when Meg was sitting on the edge of our futon and buttoning her pajama top, she asked me why I hadn't wanted to play the Elkind's game. "You didn't find Melanie appealing?" she asked.

I could've answered the question safely; there were many options open to me. I could have told the truth and said that I didn't want to share her with Mr Elkind. I did not enjoy the idea of a forty-three-year-old Yalie, a man who looked as though he'd just crawled out of a tanning booth in some Park Avenue spa, putting his hands on her. Instead I reached out and put my own hands on Meg. I traced the curve of her hip with my thumb.

"She was beautiful tonight," I said.

"Then why didn't you take up the offer?"

"You wanted to sleep with him?"

"Of course not. I don't find him attractive at all."

"So, there's your answer," I said.

But that wasn't the end of it. Even though there had never been a choice, her question still somehow stood and I had to try to answer it again.

"I didn't want to complicate anything," I said. "It would have been too tangled up and confused. I like everything to be free and clear, without complications, or too many commitments."

"Like it is with me."

"Sure. We're completely attached; totally obligated, and that's not complicated. We're free that way. That's the whole point of monogamy, right?"

"You certainly know how to make me feel wanted."

"I didn't think I needed to convince after all that," I said. I gestured toward the wet spot on our bedsheets.

"It wasn't meant for me. Turns out that, no, you really wanted to fuck Elkind's wife. Going home with me was safer."

"That's not how it is," I said.

"No? How is it then?"

## THE BACH MONOLOGUE

I imagine that the inventor Anatol Josepho and his wife, a silent film star, were probably the first to have sex in a photomaton. It was his invention. After this Russian immigrant made his first million selling the patent to Underwood typewriters he proposed to the starlet, and it seems highly probable that, after accepting the proposal, the two of them would've consummated the arrangement in one of his machines.

Whether or not this is true, what is certain is that our history, our rollicking enjoyment of our quick passing, has gotten mixed up with cameras of all kinds. We've taken pictures of ourselves, captured our light in various lenses during our most awkward or naked moments. We've been overexposed to photo-paper memories so that now and now we can no longer distinguish where the mechanism stops and our bodies start.

Meg and my encounter with a photobooth happened after one of her performances at the Skylight Room and Cabaret. She tested her cello act in between the crooners and divas in a club where jazz standards are performed with fidelity to the cabaret tradition. Meg's set didn't fit, but that was her intention. She wanted to work what she called a vaudeville space because she needed conventions in order to break with them. How could she topple barriers if there weren't any?

The room had a high ceiling, the stage was set in the center, whereas the bar was on the far North Wall. Lit by giant glass

chandeliers and round bulbs mounted to the pillars the space was, despite its openness, oppressive and dim. I ordered my usual straight shot of house whiskey. I have two shots of whiskey at social events where hard liquor is available; if there is no whiskey then I only allow myself one glass of white wine, preferably Pinot Gris. I watched the backside of the girl behind the counter as she leaned over to fetch the shot glass and then glanced into the mirror behind the bar.

Meg walked onto the stage. She was dragging her cello roughly by its neck, and when she reached the metal folding chair she let out a long sigh.

"Do any of you like Bach?"

There was light applause from the audience.

"You know, a woman cellist in Bach's time wouldn't have been allowed to open up, to spread her legs like this and put the instrument, this lovely shape, in the open space between the knees," she said. She started with Bach's Cello Suite No. 1: Prelude and kept her monologue going as she moved her bow. "I'm sorry, but I have to spread my legs to play. I can just imagine this lovely couple here in the front, the mortician and his wife of a hundred years? Think of them at home later, talking to their great-grandkids: 'How was the Skylight, Great Nan?' I think they call her Nan, or Great Nan. Well that's what I think. So anyway Great Nan will say, 'We liked the girl who sang like Marion Harris but then this girl came on the stage and tried to have sex with her cello.'" Meg kept playing. She stroked the strings, fully engaging with the music, playing the Prelude just about as well as she ever would, and then she stopped again.

"Don't worry, Nan. I'm not going to fuck it, just stroke it awhile," she said. "Oh God, I'm sorry. That wasn't polite. Was it?" She closed her eyes again and played some more.

She talked throughout the recital, then stopped dead and took out her cellphone. "I just want to check my email. Just hold on for a second," she said.

I ordered a second whiskey and felt a pang of dread. The audience was laughing. They were all enjoying the show – enjoying it way too much. I toyed with the idea of breaking with my ritual and having a third shot. It was either that or risk disappointing Meg by leaving early. I didn't want to watch her spoil the show.

"Have you ever read what Sartre had to say about masturbation?" she asked. She segued into Hindemith. Sartre had pointed out that masturbation, in its solitude and enjoyment without resistance, is an evil. It is an evil because it is symptomatic of a big epistemological problem. "Do I need to say that again?" She spelled the word 'epistemological' for the audience.

"When you masturbate you reduce the other to an image, to a part of your imagination, and yet you also create real effects. Real stuff happens. Your underwear gets wet. Or, if you're a man, you end up needing a Kleenex," she said.

Meg held the cello in place with her elbows as she put her thumbs in her mouth and worked her denture forward. Meg had lost her two adult teeth when she was twelve, and now she popped out her denture and held the acrylic object out to her audience.

She lisped at them. She'd been jumping on a neighbor's Olympic sized trampoline in Hillsboro, a trampoline with a yellow and blue target drawn in its center to indicate where you

should land in order to maximize your elevation. She'd been trying to jump high enough so she could see over her neighbor's ranch style house, so that she could spot where the chimney met the roof. She wanted her feet to be aligned with the storm drains, but she misjudged and ended up coming down on the springs and smashing her face against the outer rail.

"I knocked my teeth out," Meg said. And then she picked up playing her cello again. She put her false teeth back in her mouth and played simpler and simpler tunes, moving from Hendrix to the Beatles to Lady Gaga to 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat'. She kept on until the audience booed her, kept on until she had to leave the stage.

I met her backstage as she closed the case for her cello; she slammed it with purpose as she ignored the stare coming from a man in a tuxedo. The stage manager wasn't happy.

"Nice one," I said.

Meg was elated.

And it was after this, after Meg's big success and during the subway ride back to our apartment, that she returned to the question of Elskind's wife, and demanded that we settle the matter in a photobooth.

## THE PHOTOBOOTH

She twisted a simple comment I made about the New York City transit system map on Lexington Ave. I mentioned that Brennan's design was merely utilitarian, and that if New Yorkers had had any taste they would have kept the Vignelli version.

"Vignelli's version was a flop thirty years ago. You've never seen the Vignelli version in action. What are you talking about?"

It didn't matter how long ago it had been. Time doesn't require change, certainly not changes for the worse. It was an argument we'd had before. In fact it was a ritual. I'd point out that Massimo Vignelli's design for the New York Subway Transit map in 1972 had been an achievement. Applying geometry to chaos, he had found the right way to cut up space. His was a diagrammatic solution, color-coded and with straightened lines, and yes he'd sacrificed realism for clarity, but it had been worth it.

"A subway map should be a diagram, not a faithful topography. London, Moscow, Paris are all cities with simple diagrams, but New Yorkers wanted to keep it real," I said.

It was an argument we'd had a hundred times, and I expected Meg to point out how Vignelli's design was difficult to use. It had so little relationship to reality that whatever utility might have been gained due to its simplicity was more than undone by the fact of its irrationalism. She'd say that the Vignelli transit map had been a kind of psychotic break and I'd respond that I hadn't been making a utilitarian argument but an aesthetic one.

Instead of all of this she broke from the script. Instead of filling in the blanks or connecting the dots to our usual conversation Meg improvised.

"Do you think about other people when we fuck?" she asked.

I tried sticking to the topic at hand, to the business about diagrams and subway maps. So I told her that I usually thought about triangles.

"Bullshit," she said.

"No. I mean it," I said. Of course I didn't mean it at all. "I don't picture triangles or draw them. I think them. I try to be triangular."

Meg looked at me incredulously, reached out and gave me a push on my chest, and then looked up and down the line. The station was mostly empty, and I noticed that there was a smudge on the floor of the station. It looked as though someone had burned something, maybe charcoal, along the edge of the platform and I imagined that perhaps it was a stain where the exhaust from passing trains met with the perforated pattern in the white concrete, and while I was looking at this Meg unbuttoned her faux fur overcoat, and then turned so I could watch her reach under her skirt and pull off her panties. She stepped out of them, a pair of semi-transparent ruffled black panties with red polka dots, and handed them over to me.

"Let's find a place," she said. "Not the triangle and the transit map, but you and me."

"You're very dramatic," I said.

Meg smiled at me, then leaned up against me and put her mouth against my ear. "Find a place for us," she said.

The photobooth was under the metal and concrete stairway. It was an open yellow rectangle with a red curtain that we could use to shut off the upper half of the booth from the platform and the fact that it was tucked under the stairs and could be partially shrouded from view provided enough of a false sense of privacy for us. Meg slipped her fur coat half off and fumbled with the zipper on my khaki chinos, and as she opened my trousers and got a firm grip I glanced over her shoulder at an advertisement for Wrigley's Juicy Fruit Gum. The poster on the steel wall of the photobooth must have dated back to the fifties. It reminded me of Charles Atlas or Judge Parker. The script at the bottom of the poster read: *Play it smart and play it safe when you go swimming. This Public Service Poster was brought to you by Juicy Fruit gum.*

Meg kissed me and then realized my distraction. She followed the track of my gaze and then laughed at the poster.

"No. Not Juicy Fruit, not Levis Jeans, not Heinz Tomato Ketchup," she said.

But as we found a rhythm in the photobooth, as we connected and I tapped against Meg's cervix, I did feel triangular. My head filled with visions of Etch a Sketches, Cracker Jack Snacks, Model T Fords, and Frisbees. It was somewhat clumsy sex, definitely rushed, but as we went through the motions, as we found pleasure, something went a little sideways. There was a sound like tearing metal, or like rusted gears being turned.

"What?" I said.

"Don't stop."

The machine we were in was moving with us somehow. As Meg pumped up and down and I squeezed her around the waist, as her ruffled panties slipped out of my hand (I'd been holding onto them all along) and my consciousness shifted, there was that tearing sound. I thought we were going to tip the photobooth over. That we were breaking something.

"Don't stop." I don't know who said it.

And then, afterwards, and while Meg got dressed inside the booth, I found the photos. There were hundreds of photobooth snapshots scattered on the concrete floor of the platform: black and white instant prints depicting men and women from other

eras. There was an Italian man with slicked back hair looking just a bit sketchy in his Sunday suit, and there was a maybe flapper-girl with an arrow on her hat. It was a white arrow directing me to look at the girl's pretty face. Perhaps the arrow was made of paper? It was set on the brim of her cloche.

I wondered if our activity, if the two of us fucking, had caused the booth to malfunction, and then I wondered the opposite. That is, I briefly considered the possibility that the photobooth's malfunctioning might have somehow caused us to fuck.

There were, it turned out, exactly one hundred and fifty photobooth snapshots scattered on the platform. The pile was right outside the door of the booth. Each strip had four photos, four identical prints. There were four photos of a woman wearing an oversized felt cap with a backdrop decorated by arts and craft floral wallpaper. There was a strip of four identical portraits of an ivy-league girl with blonde hair, dark mascara, and a mouth that was a straight line. Four photos depicted a worker with his eyes closed. He was a young man in suspenders who had a cigar in his smiling mouth.

I pulled back the red curtain and caught sight of Meg as she slipped her rust colored shirt over her head. Her breasts were just like other breasts. Her body was lean and healthy, but not unique. She was different from some women and the same as others. Meg being Meg was not something I had to think about, and yet I was excited to see her bare skin, her belly, and her legs. The photographs under my feet, all the faces from the distant and recent past, seemed to threaten that basic fact. The snapshots trivialized the otherwise happy fact of our existence.

"We got photos? Let me see," Meg said. "What are these?"

"We tilted the machine."

"Like in pinball?"

"All our rocking must have broken something inside it," I said.

"These negatives were already inside?" Meg asked. She picked up one of the strips and, looked at the man smoking a pipe in each frame.

"What else could it be?" I asked.

"Allan, this photograph was probably taken fifty years ago, maybe longer, and the backdrop isn't even close to right."

I looked at the pile of photographs, then reached out and put my hand on Meg's hip. I wanted her, wanted her again, but felt that my desire didn't make any sense. I was confused at the results of my desire. We had photographic evidence demonstrating that our desire didn't make any sense.

"Let's gather them up," I said. "Do you think you could fit them all in your pockets?"

I curled up four black and white duplications of a young couple wearing foam balls on their noses and smiling like children, four photos of a girl who would've been Shirley Temple's twin except for her frown, four color photographs of a man wearing sunglasses with brown lenses and a partially unbuttoned disco shirt in front of an orange curtain.

"These photos couldn't have been taken in this booth, Allan. They're so different."

But I just kept moving, stuffing strip after strip into her pockets, not even looking at them.

"They are all the same," I said.

## CONCEPTUAL ART

My work is conceptual, critics say it's abstract and intellectual, but the real aim of all the perfect black rectangles I mount in store-bought acrylic frames is to create the opposite effect. I want to expose how the corporeal is imbedded in concepts and this is why my art objects don't contain any ideas or express anything. The rectangles express nothing but the concept of repetition materialized and as such I can produce them indefinitely without ever risking the boredom of actual repetition. The secret to my success (my work has been commissioned for the Whitney, MoMA, the Art Institute of Chicago, and more) is that I'm not aiming to say anything. The only thing that my art might say is: "Talking. Talking. Talking."

Mine is the art of drawing speech bubbles with nothing inside.

I'm telling you about this not to brag and not because I want to confess my own good fortune after having stumbled upon an approach to the art world that requires almost nothing of me, but rather in order to explain why I felt compelled to paint over the photos from the photobooth. Those snapshots, all the people in those frames with their historic specificity and clichéd facial expressions, struck me as a kind of refutation of my brand. These photos were a repetition that emphasized trivial differences while my 'art surrogates', my black rectangles, are about pure difference. My rectangles embody the concept of difference, but the photobooth snapshots countered this idea with a too human accounting. All those photographs of stupid blank faces, of an old lady with a phony felt rose on her hat or of a chubby teenager whose red lipstick smile and soft white sweater pathetically exhibited her unironic desire to be Marilyn Monroe, were a kind of affront.

So I painted over them. My process is fast and mechanical; I laid the snapshots out on my board, clipped the right sized stencil in place over each set of four frames, and rolled ink across them, like vertical censor's blocks.

I did this one hundred and fifty times that night. I didn't sleep but repeated the action over and over again. I drank one cup of coffee after another.

Unlike some artists, guys like Joseph Kosuth, I keep my studio spare and clean. The hard wood floor is polished once a week by a janitorial staff, and the four pine tables where I work are not spotted with paint or plaster, but are also kept clean and polished. Track lighting in the ceiling keeps the space well lit at night, and two plate glass windows on the east and south side of the room make sure the light is balanced during the day. Still, after painting the photos, and when I'd found a place for every new rectangle on one of my drafting tables, my studio appeared in a bit of a mess.

Conceptual art has always been about erasing the boundary between art and life, and this has usually meant erasing art as a technique of production. Marcel Duchamp's readymades, his urinal and hat rack, were acts of magic wherein he absurdly transformed everyday objects into art simply by signing a name to them. Not even his name, but just any name. It was a gag. The name he used for the urinal was R. Mutt. Still, Duchamp had produced objects with discernible aesthetic qualities,

and because of this many people misunderstood him, and, as my friend Kosuth says, all of art after Duchamp has been one big misunderstanding.

I was exhausted by the end of it, and maybe hypnagogic. The problem of the photographs and how those particular prints came to be inside that photobooth kept presenting itself to me as I rolled out ink.

Meg had been right about the impossibility of the photos. We'd found a rhythm during our awkward lovemaking, some sort of tantric pulse perhaps, and we'd brought the photographs into being. It had been a reproductive act in a very strange way, and now I was altering our children. I had become a new Kronos, a new god with power over history, over time. I thought of Goya's Kronos and imagined that I was like Goya only I would carve black images directly onto time instead of plaster. I was Kronos eating my own young.

The surrogates I was making could replace the past. I did it again and again and thought of how the world might be perfected. The contingent differences of our past could be replaced by the realization of pure difference. A repetition without any alteration, a pure repetition without any features, this could be our history maybe.

I rolled out more ink, made more and more rectangles, and avoided sleep.

I painted over the smiling face of a woman with a beehive hairdo and eyes that seemed so innocent, so full of post-war optimism. I painted over a bald old man whose grim expression indicated that he felt there was something serious about how he looked in his denim overalls. I painted over them all and knew that I was doing something a bit vicious. It was a violation, a violent thing.

## MEG'S MOUTH

Meg was brushing her teeth in our small but tidy bathroom, a room not much bigger than the closet. I could see her shadow on the clean white wall in the hall, and I watched her movements, the way her arm vibrated when she brushed up and down, back and forth.

Lying in our bed I felt pressure build up under my left eye and radiate to my temple, and I applied counter pressure. I cupped my left hand over the left side of my face, and Meg's shadow jumped to the right. I watched her move. The outline of her head, neck, chest and arms seemed to be dancing or gyrating along with the sound of running water. She always wasted water when she brushed her teeth.

I got out of bed even though it seemed like I'd just crawled into it a few moments before, and I stumbled over to the bathroom in order to turn the faucet off, but when I turned the corner I was distracted from this mission. Meg was brushing her teeth in the nude except for a pair of mismatched athletic socks. The sock on her left foot had red stripes on the upper part, whereas the stripes on her right sock were yellow. But finding her like that, even though her socks were mismatched, moved me to grab her around the waist and pull her to me and she seemed amenable to this, even though she held up her finger indicating I should wait. She pulled away from me so that

she could spit, but then stepped back and put my arm around her waist again.

Standing there with her in the bathroom, watching her spit, what had started out as a rushed erotic impulse shifted into curiosity. Her morning ritual had changed and I found I just wanted to look in her mouth.

"Say 'Ahhh,'" I said. And when she opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue I saw what was different. Her teeth were all there. There was no metal inside, no plastic mold clinging to the roof of her mouth. I put my hands on her cheeks and looked as close as I could, then scanned the rest of her face for any other changes.

"Can I stopth saying Ahhh?"

Her nose was slightly smaller and her cheekbones were a bit higher. Meg was prettier, I realized. And her teeth were fixed. She'd been made whole.

"What?" she asked me. "What's going on?"

"Your socks don't match," I told her.

## ALL THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

My headache returned once I was on the street and heading to the New York Gallery. The installation I was constructing there consisted of black rectangles in acrylic frames of differing colors, but it was a little different. Some of the frames were dark red and some light green, and I included placards with title and texts that explained each of the individual rectangles. For instance, I'd entitled one of the rectangles *Ice Cream* and included a description of eating an ice cream cone on Coney Island in 1983. Another was entitled *Feuerbach* and the explanatory text was lifted from Marx's second thesis on Feuerbach.

"The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth – i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question."

My headache got worse and worse as I made my way down Lexington Ave toward Broadway. The people, the passersby, smiled broadly at me as I stumbled along. One man in corduroys and a pink sweater smiled as he passed me on my left, but a woman with a large rust colored afro and wearing a skin tight satin jogging suit, her lipstick the color of dollar bills, stopped next to me. She was there for me as I crumpled to the ground and she reached down with her big hands and picked me up off the sidewalk. She set me upright but facing away from her and I found myself staring at a shop window for Macy's. I caught my breath as I examined naked mannequins behind the glass and signs printed in Helvetica.

THIS WAY UP, one of the signs read. ONE WAY, read the other.

"Are you all right?" my transvestite savior asked. "You okay, mister?" Her voice was low and loud.

"Just a migraine," I said.

I looked in at the naked mannequins and then let my focus shift so I was looking at the people behind me as they were reflected on the glass. There was a steady stream of passersby, hundreds of people making their way, and they all appeared

to be beautiful. A homeless man in a tan wool coat and hiking boots, a businesswoman in a red shirt with ruffled sleeves, a bohemian girl in a green sweater and wearing cat eye glasses, and the junky kid whose face was dirty and whose Mohawk was greasy – they all looked glamorous and glorious. They all had an extra shine, and there was something phony about them. It was because of this phoniness they all seemed divine.

## BACK IN THE PHOTOBOOTH

Meg obliged me. Half naked in the photobooth she kept shivering and while the first time the closeness of the tracks and the possibility of strange interruptions (no subway station is ever truly empty in New York City) had added to the thrill, to the adventure, this second time all of these factors were just inconveniences, only hindrances.

Meg was half naked and I was still fully dressed and so her shivering moved me to explain what might be happening to her.

"Do you know why modern paintings are flat?" I asked her.

"What? If you're going to give me an art history lesson then let me put my shirt on."

"Wait. No. I want to try this again."

"Well, let's get it over with."

I put my hands on her, on her back, and pulled her to me, but it was particularly uninspiring to hold her like that. I could tell that she was freezing, that she was unhappy.

Modern paintings are flat because people in the 19th century stopped believing in God. After the steam engine arrived, after electric light and moving pictures, God became superfluous.

"That's Nietzsche," I said. I looked at the advertisement for Juicy Fruit and then down at Meg's breasts. I stroked her nipples with my left hand. After the death of God believing became difficult. We couldn't be sure of anything and we needed to be sure, so we tried to find what was real. I put my hands on Meg's breasts and then stopped groping her and bent over to fetch her blouse from the dusty floor.

"Please?" she asked.

The photobooth made a noise. There was a clang and the whole thing vibrated.

"Don't stop," she said. Meg put her blouse on but she didn't button it. Instead she took my hand and put it under her skirt. She was wet after all.

The photobooth clanged again and the rusty mechanism started moving. We could both feel it.

The second time the photographs the machine produced were current. That is, if they weren't all photographs from the new millennium then they were all at least current in the sense that they'd been taken during the last few decades of the 20th century. These were faces from the present, and the people, the faces, were self-aware, ironic, and self-mocking. A woman in one photo showed her bare shoulder, pointing it at the camera in a kind of shrug. Another photo showed a man, a teenage boy actually, pointing at the camera. He held his fist up over his mouth, and pointed out at the viewer in a gesture that was an accusation. Another woman's face was obscured by a paper mask, the kind of generic Lone Ranger mask you might end up wearing on Halloween if you'd left your costume to the last

minute. There was a man with a Kodak instant camera, taking a picture of the glass panel that hid the camera in the photobooth wall. There was a woman with oversized sunglasses, sixties style glamour glasses, but this was a retro gesture. And there was a photo of someone's sandaled feet. Apparently the subject had been standing on his or her head.

We gathered the new photos in paper shopping bags from Macy's that we'd brought along for the task, and then grasped each other again. Simultaneously we dropped the bags and clutched. I put my hand on her breasts, and scanned her flushed face, looking for a clue to what she was, what we were together. She took my hand in hers, undoing my grip on her, and seemed to be on the verge of telling me something when the noise of the coming subway car stopped her.

The photobooth started clanging again. I could just hear it over the din from the train. I turned to look and found more photos were spewing out of the slot. There, under the faux wood panel, more self-portraits mechanically slid out one after another. Men and women with screwed up smiles were crossing their eyes. A hat seemed to float in midair in the next set of photos. A white woman with a giant orange afro was wearing glasses with thick black plastic frames in the next set.

The portraits kept coming even after I'd filled our paper bags, coat pockets, and my trousers. The portraits kept coming even when we couldn't take them, even when there was nothing to do with all the faces. We just watched as they littered the concrete platform.

"We have to leave them behind," Meg said.

## INK BLOTS

This time I painted random blots instead of rectangles. I painted over the new crop of self-aware and ironic portraits, and titled each one with a psychoanalytic description as if they were cards from a Rorschach test. I covered a color photograph that showed a young woman blinking, her eyes closed, and gave it the title *Patient May See A Mask Or Female Sexual Organs*.

I filled every frame with white paint first, and then came back to each tiny canvas and created black shapes, some of them looking like butterflies, others like numeric symbols from another land, some almost like faces themselves.

I mounted the blots in acrylic frames, all of them black, and then made several trips to the basement of the condominium complex in order to set the frames on the washer and dryer unit and across the concrete floor.

Looking over what I'd done an unexpected calm fell over me. Painting the photos had made my head feel better for one thing, and this time I could feel the world changing as I worked. I'd created art that could communicate in an entirely new way. Rather than paint to change the minds of viewers or patrons I was painting directly onto them. I could feel it; the process inside my own head as I set up the rows of the rectangles confirmed everything. I didn't have to think out what to do, but rather my thoughts were simply and exactly what I was doing. The flow of my ideas and the movement of my hands, the ink blots and the concept of pure form as a negation, all of this came together in the damp basement. I put the frames on

the floor, set the photos in perfect rows, like army men, or like widgets coming off of an assembly line.

It was ridiculous. Of course it was absurd. One odd and unexplained occurrence, or even three of them, didn't constitute any sort of causal relationship. I'd painted over the other photobooth pictures and the next day Meg's broken teeth had repaired themselves. I'd painted over photobooth photos and the world had altered into something out of a fashion magazine. Our petty lives had been improved because I'd erased all the stupid differences, all those differences that were really the same, or so it seemed to me.

Still, I knew better. My subjective experience didn't actually demonstrate anything. It was absurd to think that I had changed anything. My paintings could not have healed Meg's mouth, for instance.

Despite knowing the truth I carried on lining up the censored faces just as if I thought I could do magic. And when, after time passed, the visceral power of my new ritual dissipated, I kept going.

## BACH FOR CONVERSATION

"Would you like breakfast?" I asked Meg. My voice sounded a little strange. Instead of the usual deep rumbling I might expect my voice was rather more like something produced by a percussion instrument. Everything popped out of my mouth and clicked into place, and there was nothing confusing about what I'd said.

"Breakfast."

There was something different about Meg too. I watched her practise her cello in our living room, and she was sitting on the side of the orange Armgardt sofa with the armrest. She pressed her body flat against the back of her instrument as she played Bach, and then leaned back to readjust herself and I heard a tearing sound as the wood and her skin, sticky from sweat, separated.

I sat down across from her on our balloona stool, a regular wood stool with a plain design that is only exceptional for the fact that it is covered over in stretched party balloons, and I noticed that I too was entirely naked. I felt each individual string of rubber on my backside, but I stayed there and listened to her play. She played Bach mechanically, flawlessly; it was a clockwork performance.

"Bagels? Coffee?" I clicked at her.

"Orange juice. Fresh fruit. Bagel with lox," the music of Bach communicated back to me.

She hadn't spoken a word. Somehow I just knew.

## THE MASSES

Out on 53rd standing next to the box for the Village Voice, the full significance of the difference dawned on me. For one thing I was still naked even though I was standing on the curb outside my condo. My bare feet were tender, unprepared for the rough concrete, and I was squeamish about the smudges below. Everything was coated with car exhaust, and I felt vulnerable

and exposed. Still, I wasn't the only person milling about in a birthday suit. The businessman carrying his briefcase out of the McDonald's was also naked, and a bag lady pushing her grocery cart across 54th was unpleasantly nude, and the toned woman getting out of her Lexus. She had perfect breasts and no pubic hair at all. She pressed a button on a key chain and her car honked once to indicate the alarm had been activated.

It made perfect sense; after all the entire point of my ritual, my art, was to get to what was real. I'd been following a line drawn by Clement Greenberg, the dead New York art critic. He'd said that art history ended with Abstract Expressionism. He'd claimed that Manet was the first truly modern painter because Manet had started the process that eventually eliminated three-dimensional space on the canvas. Manet broke with linear perspective and emphasized the flatness of his canvas. Manet returned to what was real. Over the years artists worked harder and harder to get to reality. We eliminated painting, then worked on erasing all art objects, and then finally we aimed at getting rid of the very idea of art. And that's where I came in.

Most of the people on the street had pudgy, wrinkled, unappealing bodies. Even the young people appeared to be old when they walked naked out of the subway, or emerged with sagging breasts from a dry cleaners. A man with a wild and long beard scratched at his furry ass as he made his way down Broadway. A redheaded girl listened to her iPod and bobbed her head up and down to the beat while her loose flesh swung back and forth. Her tits were tiny like little mistakes on her flat chest, just slight protrusions.

Everyone had moles and rashes and warts and wrinkles. The reality of a naked New York City was repulsive. People were really ugly animals. Clicking and honking monsters without any dignity.

Realizing what I'd done I walked the streets for hours. Wrapped in blank newspapers I wanted to tell everyone that God was dead. I wanted to confess that it was me, I was the one who had killed him, but all that I could manage was a squeaking noise.

Still, my true devastation arrived on Broadway. Angelina Jolie stepped out of a New York City yellow cab and I was the only one who stopped to stare. I am pretty sure it was Angelina Jolie, but at the time I couldn't remember her name. All I knew was that I recognized her and I knew the man with her. It had to be Brad Pitt who stepped out onto the street next to her. They both paused as if expecting a reaction but it never came.

At the time I knew they were attractive. Angelina had very round and symmetrical breasts and round hips. Brad Pitt's pectoral muscles were visible, and his penis was long. There didn't appear to be any fat on him, and both of their faces were perfectly balanced. Their eyes were neither too far apart nor too close together, and their teeth were straight. The only complaint one might muster was that Angelina's lips were maybe a tad too large. Looking at the movie stars I let my newspapers and plastic bags fall away. There was nothing there, nothing to them. They were healthier than most. They were less distorted, more average, but I didn't find either of them to be any more appealing than the rest. If anything their health and symmetry just made them tragic. They were less than the rest of us nothing precisely because they weren't ugly.

Angelina made a clicking noise to Brad and he smiled and put his arm around her hip as they stepped onto the sidewalk, and then he started clicking back to her. Angelina held up her hands, indicating that Brad should wait, and then got on her hands and knees and began to explore the tufts of flowering weeds that had grown up through a crack there. She dug through the crack, jamming her fingers in and tearing up the plants while Brad stood next to her, still smiling. He looked back and forth, up and down the street, as if he were posing or acting, but it was probably just a left over habit.

Angelina Jolie found what she wanted. She pulled a long, dirty, pink worm out of the ground and held it up to Brad. He smiled at her, his usual wise-guy smile, but didn't indicate that he understood anything, and since he didn't seem to want it Angelina popped the creature into her own mouth. She put the worm between her fat lips, and sucked it down.

## JUICY FRUIT

I could smell Meg, her genitals, and I could touch her however I wanted, but sitting on the cold wood bench inside the photobooth I was not moved by her nakedness. There was no barrier between us now, and thus no way to communicate. To get her to the photobooth I'd simply taken her by the hand and led her away from her cello, into the condominium elevator and onto the street. We stood on Lexington Ave, and then stood there amidst the dicks and nipples and hair, the ocean of skin and limbs that pushed past us, around us. They were still moving, still going to their offices or to the University, to their cardboard boxes and liquor stores, but for how much longer could the old pattern hold? When would the animals realize that the old places, their homes, their wives, their jobs were gone? And if they did realize what was missing would it make any difference?

I looked at the poster inside the photobooth, the advertisement for Juicy Fruit gum, and tried to find something in it that might get my dick hard. I couldn't really think beyond the basics, but I did manage to focus on the abstract cartoon of a cowgirl admiring the gum packet. Her face was just a set of abstract shapes. Her face had nothing in common with a real woman's face. Her nose was nothing but a straight line pointing thirty degrees to the right. Her lips were simple red curves, but she was eying the Juicy Fruit pack, considering the possibility of fitting the rectangle into her mouth. The box would never fit in there, but she longed for it.

Underneath this phallic dream, in case anyone had missed the point, were the words 'different...delicious.' I considered this obscenity and felt a twinge. I thought the words 'Juicy Fruit,' heard the sound of each letter inside my head.

Juicy Fruit. Fucking Juicy Fruit.

I pulled Meg to me in the photobooth, but didn't look at her stupid open maw or her vacant eyes. Instead I pushed her legs open and put my hand between her legs.

"Juicy," I said. It was a fully formed word.

The sound the photobooth made when Meg and I found ways not to connect were strangely wet. Meg got on top of me, ground down on me, and then stopped to pose. She licked her lips and then looked down to see what effect she was hav-

ing, and the sound the machine made became more and more regular. I could imagine gears forming inside the photobooth where before there had just been chemicals and goo.

Meg closed her eyes and rotated her hips. She had beautiful hips, nicely curved. Her belly protruded just enough so that she didn't look emaciated. I put my hands on her belly as she rotated her nicely curved hips.

## ONE SUPPORTING PHOTOGRAPH

"Are you going to start painting again?" Meg asks me. She sits down next to me at our Formica top kitchen table, blue and green with a sparkles. It is the perfect space for coffee mugs and cereal bowls. "Are you going to meet your obligations in terms of your commission?" she asks.

I tell her that I'm not sure. I can't decide what I should do.

The photobooth only produced one photograph that last time, and we keep it in the safety deposit box at the bank. The faces on the photographic paper are familiar, famous even, but long dead. They are beautiful faces. She looks especially elegant in white gloves and a tweed overcoat. She looks a little bit like Winona Ryder I think.

I don't know what to do with the picture. I read the New York Times, the business section and the book reviews, looking for clues that one picture might have fixed everything, but I'm worried. People aren't going to movies anymore, according to the Times. And the authors of the business section report that the housing sector is still depressed.

Meg puts her hand on my knee. She wants me to look at her and not at the editorial section of the Times, but I'm determined to keep reading.

"Are you going to the gallery today?"

"JFK," I say to her. "Jacqueline Onasis Kennedy."

"Don't start with that," she says.

"They're not enough," I say. "They aren't real enough. They look like mannequins or magazine models. Too pretty."

Meg squeezes my leg, but not affectionately. She digs into my flesh with her fingernails.

"Are you going to start painting again?" she asks me.

"Camelot and Juicy Fruit. It's not enough," I tell her.

"Allan, answer me," she says.

I finally turn to her then. I look Meg up and down. She's wearing long johns. She's in men's green cotton long johns, and I notice the hole in them and smirk. The hole marks the spot where Meg is different. If I were to wear the long johns the hole would serve a different function, but on her the fly was a provocation.

"You want me to paint again?" I ask. "You want another chance?"

The people on the last photograph were JFK and Jacqueline. Andy Warhol would be glad if he were still alive to witness this new Universe.

I imagine the first couple smiling away in some dark drawer. I think of them as I reach out to Meg again.

Douglas Lain's first novel, *Billy Moon: 1968*, tells the story of Christopher Robin Milne's fictional involvement with the French general strike in May of 1968 and is due out from Tor Books in 2013.

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# CASPIAN GRAY

# INSECT

Caspian Gray currently lives in the USA with a man and a dachshund. His work has recently appeared in *Pseudopod* and *Scheherezade's Bequest*.

The crickets started screaming after Luis came back from the war. Theirs was the lowest form of communication; they did not so much exchange ideas as alternate between different ways of expressing alarm. When Amy noticed they were out of water gel and took their bowl to refill it, they screamed. When she sprinkled calcium powder on their food, they screamed. When she cleaned the tiny bodies of their dead brethren out of the cage, they screamed.

It was tiresome.

Outside, now that each night brought frost, the world was quiet. There were the last dying flutters of cecropia moths, blown along the sidewalk like dead leaves. The swarms of ladybugs were already burrowed deep into schools and churches and people's homes, where occasionally she heard them chirring to each other. She'd met a single dragonfly, perhaps the last one of November, perched in the sun on her front door, but that dragonfly was too tired or too old to speak.

Only the feeder crickets at the store were still trying to express their mangled lives.

"Amy," said Rich. "How long have you been sitting there staring?"

Amy brushed her greasy bangs out of her eyes and stood up. "Not long." She took a few steps away from the cricket cage. "I just sat down for a second."

Rich smiled in that awkward way that would have told her how unhappy he was even if they'd just met. "No, no," he said. "You're welcome to sit down. I just don't know how you stand the smell."

The cage was rank. Brittany was supposed to clean it every Wednesday, but she didn't like to touch the crickets, and she

# JOY



had dimples and a way with her cleavage that exempted her from doing most tasks she didn't like.

"I could clean it out," Amy said. "I don't mind."

Rich shook his head. "Nah, I need you at the register." He walked a few steps away. Amy unbent from behind the counter to face the lack of customers in the pet supply store that had driven her to attempt to converse with the crickets in the first place.

Last week, she'd started to sneak them food. Unwilling to pay for the pellets designed for them, Rich fed them Milk-Bones. Every time she walked into work, Amy could hear the sound of their hunger, a quiet gnawing underneath all their other tiny thoughts and feelings. She gave them clumps of mashed potato, torn-off pieces of turkey, whole pretzels with the salt licked off. They seemed to like it, though Amy didn't know if it was healthy for them. The crickets lived only a few weeks, even when people didn't buy them to feed to turtles, snakes, and toads. She didn't know whether it mattered for them to eat healthfully, as long as their little bellies weren't empty, as long as they weren't so damn miserable.

"You're staring again," said Rich. Amy wished he would go away.

**R**ocket leapt into the air when Amy got home. He didn't think in words any more than the crickets did – any more than *any* dog did – but the press on his bladder was clear. Dogs were harder to hear than insects, but long familiarity made Rocket easy.

"Calm down," she murmured, struggling to clip on his leash. "Calm down." Rocket did not calm down; she had to wrestle

him still just to get hold of his collar. Rocket whined, wagging his tail with enough enthusiasm to bruise her leg. She kissed his forehead even though it meant a few extra seconds before they could go outside; sheer torture for his canine perception of time. He was a big red merle Australian shepherd, still young and therefore still ridiculous. Everything about his bouncing gait made her smile.

There were few living things left in the copse of trees across from her apartment complex. Squirrels twittered past, making noises larger than themselves against the carpet of dead leaves, plastic bags, and rain-battered magazines. Rocket yanked his leash. To him, squirrels were not quite the same as squeaky toys, but they were close enough that he would be surprised if he ever caught one and found it made a different noise when he squeezed it between his teeth.

The flocks of starlings had already come to pick the trees bare of crabapples, then moved on. Even the toads had abandoned their guard over the rain-slicked sidewalks, holed up in their dank, leafy dens. Some piece of Amy's heartbeat already thrummed with impatience for spring, but there was solace in this quiet, of a kind she could not find in the warmer months, when every animal clamored to be heard.

Rocket stopped every few paces to sniff at the grass and lift his leg. Amy both screened his thoughts and ignored them; she imagined this was what years of marriage would be like, intimacy both comforting and occasionally wearisome, offering the type of calm and relaxation she never found in the presence of other human beings. They took the long way around the complex, even though Amy's legs were tired from standing all day. The cold breeze felt good against her cheeks after the

stale air at work. If she wasn't so hungry, she might have stayed outside for hours, the way she used to do when she was young, before the gift and inconvenience of hearing animals began to intrude on her life.

Luis was waiting when she got back. He parked his wheelchair in front of the door, blocking her way. Amy bent down to let Rocket off the leash; the dog slipped between the wheels and the door frame, then sat behind Luis, looking at her and wagging his tail.

"Hi," said Amy. "How's your day been?"

"I wish you'd come see me when you got home," said Luis. "Rather than just taking care of the dog. I wish you'd say hi."

Amy shrugged. "I didn't see you. Rocket had to pee."

Luis wheeled out of the way so she could come inside. Amy kicked her shoes off and sat down on the sofa. It felt good to rest her feet.

"So how was your day?" Luis wheeled over to sit across from her, close enough that their knees almost bumped.

"Fine. Rich wasn't too bad. I can't wait to quit this shit and get a real job in an office or something." She didn't mention the misery of the crickets, or the elderly couple who'd brought in an obese golden retriever whose heart she felt gradually giving up. "I mean, I knew majoring in history wasn't the best idea, but I thought a BA would be worth *something*." She peeled off her work shirt with its cheery name tag and tossed it on the floor. Rocket wandered over to stick his nose in the sleeve, sniffing the armpit. Luis looked at her. She couldn't decide if his gaze was on her breasts, spilling out of her dingy bra, or on the puff of tummy that hung over the waistband of her pants in a way it didn't used to.

"Whose turn is it to make dinner tonight?" she asked.

"Yours."

"Right. Lemme toss a shirt on." Amy headed upstairs, where Luis couldn't follow. She took a long time sorting through her T-shirts, most of them from local bands long since extinct. Rocket followed her up, twining around her ankles. For just a minute, the quiet and love and wheedling neediness of his thoughts was good.

**T**he weather changed. It was still the middle of November, but suddenly the gray clouds disappeared, the air was seventy degrees, and the wind blew through like the promise of a tropical storm. The world was alive again. Gnats blossomed in the air, so numerous that Amy did not open her mouth outside for fear of swallowing an unwary group of them. Her world was full of thoughts again: the tiniest, most meaningless chatter, of the kind only insects were capable of. She was simultaneously irritated and relieved to have one last reprieve before the great white silence that was coming. Winter would be broken only by Rocket, the muffled dreams of the hibernating, and the last gasps of the dying.

It was so warm that Amy rode her bike to work. Rich frowned when she showed up with her hair disheveled and a thin sheen of sweat on her forehead.

"Jeez," he said. "Did you just come from the gym or something?"

"I rode my bike." Amy pointed towards the break room, where she'd stashed it against the snack machine.

Rich's frown deepened. "You look...sweaty," he said. "It's too cold for that."

"There were hills." Amy looked at the tile floor, then forced herself to meet Rich's eyes. "The employee handbook says we're *encouraged* to ride our bikes to work. I could even get a bonus if I do it often enough."

Rich took a step back. "Oh."

"According to corporate, there's supposed to be a bike lock out there. You know, to make it easy for us." She wanted to press her advantage, but the expression on Rich's face made her look away. "I probably won't for awhile, though. It's too cold."

Rich nodded. "We got another shipment of crickets in this morning," he said. "They're still in their box in the back. I'd like you to clean out their cage before you put the new ones in."

Amy clenched her fist, unclenched it, then smoothed out her face. "Sure," she said. "First thing."

It was easier, just a little bit, for Amy to clean out the cricket cage than it was for anybody else. She couldn't exactly order anything with a brain that small around, but she could herd them with a constant, grinding mental pressure that eventually gave her a headache.

At least it was a slow shift. All the real people had places to be on a Friday night, especially one so unexpectedly temperate.

Amy waited for Rich to disappear into the back room, then reached in for a fistful of crickets. She dumped them outside on the sidewalk, using that same mental push to edge them out towards the strip mall's abbreviated decorative garden. It was probably not a kind thing to do. Soon this Indian summer would pass. They would freeze to death in the cold. If they didn't, there were numerous predators that would eat them, from spiders and birds to the local field crickets, a much fiercer species than her poor captive-bred feeders, who had never eaten food not provided for them in their tiny enclosures.

But for just a moment, she could listen to their awe as they kept moving, encountering no glass walls to keep them in.

On impulse, Amy put a few of them into one of the clear plastic bags they were sold in, to take them home with her. That small copse of trees would be a whole world for them; they could keep her company until they died.

**W**hose turn is it to make dinner?" she asked, sitting down on the couch so Rocket could cuddle on her lap. For a brief, ridiculous moment, she was jealous that Luis didn't feel this kind of exhaustion in his legs anymore, that he was never desperate to just sit down. Immediately she quashed the thought, her cheeks turning red.

"My turn," she said, standing up. "I'll make dinner tonight. What do you want?"

Luis shrugged. "Anything but Hamburger Helper."

Amy stretched and pretended she hadn't already been going over the boxes in her head, trying to pick the flavor that would be least offensive. Luis probably wouldn't think it was funny if she made macaroni and cheese or ramen noodles instead.

"How about grilled cheese and ham sandwiches?" she asked, hoping the ham wasn't bad. "I could heat up some tomato soup."

Luis smiled. He had such a good smile. It seemed like Amy could never make him bring it out anymore. He kept it stored

somewhere, as if he knew he would not have to use it often anymore.

Amy put the prepackaged ham slices on the counter and stepped over to him, bending down until they were at eye-level. He met her gaze without speaking. Sometimes it was still easy to remember why she'd moved in with him in the first place, in those days – sun-drenched by nostalgia – before he went to Afghanistan, when he carried her around on his shoulders and they were worthless young assholes together, thrilled with the sheer possibility that echoed their every step and tossed-off curse word. She wanted to feel invincible again. She wanted *Luis* to feel invincible again.

Amy reached out to stroke his cheek. He leaned into her touch. Rocket curled around her legs, and the three of them stood perfectly still. Amy could hear Rocket's contentment, and underneath that something else, a vague, confused chirping. She remembered the crickets, sitting on the counter next to the door, and leaned over Luis to pick them up.

"What's that?" he asked, reaching for the bag and accidentally knocking it out of her hands. The crickets spilled into his lap and he snapped away from them, leaning as far back as his chair allowed.

"They're just crickets," said Amy. "Hold still, I'll take care of them."

She bent down to scoop them off his lap, but Luis was faster. Instead of sweeping them onto the floor he crushed them with his palm, squishing their guts into his pants.

"Luis!" she screeched, fisting a hand in his shirt, too late to stop him. Their deaths were too fast for the crickets to understand: release from that little bag, a few heartbeats of freedom, then nothing.

"Jesus," said Luis. "Why did you bring those nasty things home?"

"I was letting them go," said Amy. She released his shirt. "Why did you kill them?"

"I didn't mean to," Luis shrugged. "You just spilled them all over me. I reacted, that's all."

Amy knelt down and scraped one of the corpses off the leg of his pants. It felt warm – much warmer than the corpse of an insect should. Luis wrinkled his nose.

"I know I can't feel you doing that," he said, staring at her hands, "but I *feel* like I can feel you doing that."

"Well," she snapped, "next time don't murder my friends."

That surprised a laugh out of Luis. "Sorry," he said, not remotely sincere. Amy cupped the scraped-up body in her palm and started on another one. It seemed even hotter than the first. By the time she got the last one up, her palm was turning red, and Luis was squirming his shoulders. The crickets were almost too hot to touch, and Amy resisted the urge to smear them in Luis's hair only because it seemed so disrespectful to their mutilated corpses. Instead she rested her other hand on his shoulder, gripping it too tight.

"I'm serious," she said. "I'm angry with you for doing that."

Luis leaned away from her. The heat of the crickets vanished, and Luis jerked suddenly out of her grip.

"Jesus!" he said. "Did you just *burn* me?"

"No." Amy stepped away from him. Luis wheeled around to face her, and as he did his leg twitched. They both froze, staring

at it. Luis put on an expression of great concentration, but the leg did not move again. Amy retreated upstairs without a word.

**R**ocket bounced on their walk that night. The Indian Summer thrilled him; he was a puppy again, tugging at the leash and jumping after every sound. Their neighbors were out en masse, enjoying the last of the good weather, and Rocket exchanged play-bows with other dogs, whining if they ignored him.

Far off, past the net of trees that hid the road, she heard a train whistle. Rocket pricked his ears and offered a passionless yelp at the distant noise. They headed home early.

Luis was sprawled out on the couch when they got back in. He was stripped down to boxers and a T-shirt, and gave her a look that was caught somewhere between hope and determination. Amy unclipped Rocket's leash. He bounded over to Luis, snuffling around his thighs until Luis pushed him off. Amy dared a giggle, then quickly stifled it.

"Did you already...?" she asked. He used a papaverine injection when they didn't want to wait the extra time for viagra to kick in, even though the erection it caused did not look right, and sometimes did not go away for hours after they were ready to be done.

"Yeah. I did."

"Do you want to...?" she asked. Luis waited for her to finish the sentence. "I mean," she said. "What do you want to...try?"

"You know," he said. "Let's."

Amy penned Rocket in the kitchen and stripped there, down to her bra and underwear and thick work socks. Luis was looking in the other direction when she walked into the room. It was a long moment before he turned to stare at her.

"Remember what the nurse said," she murmured. "The brain is the largest sex organ."

"Jesus Christ," said Luis. "I'm sure if that nurse had a penis that she couldn't use anymore, she'd stop saying such dumb shit."

"You can *use* it," said Amy. "I mean..."

Luis tugged his boxers down. His penis sprang out, red and unhappy. She could hear Rocket's nails clicking on the kitchen floor. He hated being excluded, especially when the rest of his pack was making weird noises together.

Luis's expression was so serious that Amy wanted to laugh. A smile grew across her face without her consent, and she leaned down to press it onto Luis's lips.

"Well," she amended. "I can use it." She leaned back to tweak one of his nipples. Luis closed his eyes without smiling back at her. Foreplay used to be her favorite part. Now Luis made her feel like an interrogator trying to force pleasure like a confession from his dark, bitter body. She tenderly bit one of his earlobes, then gave him a ring of hickeys along his neck. She could hear their neighbors' television set through the wall.

Luis kept his eyes closed, his eyebrows furrowed. She never knew if he was desperately concentrating on what she was doing, or trying to block it out.

By the time they got to the act itself, she was keeping her eyes closed, too.

**A**my got home exhausted. Luis was in the kitchen, boiling water. A box of Hamburger Helper sat on the counter, unaccompanied by a pound of actual hamburger.

"Are you just making that as a side-dish?" she asked.

Luis wheeled away from the stove to face her.

"Someone," he said, "didn't buy any hamburger at the grocery store. So, no. This is the main dish."

Amy pursed her lip. "You could have called and told me. I'd have picked some up on the way home from work."

"I *did* try to call you," said Luis.

"No you didn't," snapped Amy. "I had my cell phone in my pocket all day, and it never rang." She pulled it out to prove that there was no missed-call message, but when she opened her phone it was dead. She slipped it back into her pocket.

"No," said Luis. "Let me see that. I called you three times."

"It doesn't matter – we'll just eat pasta. It's not super healthy to eat meat every day anyway."

"Jesus," he said, wheeling away from her to open the spice packet. "You're not going to go out and buy more hamburger? Even though it's your fault we don't have any?"

"I'm *tired*. You're the one who has all day free." Part of her regretted those words the second they left her mouth, but most of her was still angry, still feeling unaccountably righteous.

"You think I *want* –" Luis started, but Amy cut him off.

"You don't even do the exercises your physical therapist told you to," she said. "You *never* called that driver rehabilitation specialist, you don't check Craigslist for a car we could adapt for you – it's like you want to be stuck here! You don't *do* anything!"

Rocket stood between them, stomping his feet nervously. His nails clicked against the kitchen tile, and when Amy looked down at him he gave his tail a tentative wag.

"Sorry," she said, caressing one of his ears. "Everything is fine."

"Dammit! Don't talk to the dog, talk to *me*! I can't even argue with you without you ignoring me!"

"I don't want to argue with you!" Amy yelled. They were quiet for a moment; there was just Rocket whining and water on the stove boiling. Luis wheeled towards her, trying to nudge Rocket out of the way. Amy left her hand on Rocket's hand, and Luis covered her hand with his own.

"Look at me," he said.

Amy kept her eyes on Rocket. She wanted to be anywhere else. She wanted to leave and not come back. She wanted to disappear.

The kitchen felt hot. It might have been the boiling water, sending a cloud of steam up the kitchen ceiling, but the warmth centered on her hand. Rocket whined.

"Shh," Amy murmured. "Everything is okay."

Luis tightened his hand on hers. There was so much heat between the three of them. It crescendoed, and Rocket yelped and pulled away from both of them. Luis's leg kicked out, as if of its own accord, and caught her just above the knee.

"Holy shit," said Luis. "Holy shit! Did you see that?"

Amy kept looking at Rocket. There would be a bruise on her leg tomorrow morning.

Luis caressed his left knee. "It fucking moved!" He closed his eyes and tilted his head towards the ceiling. "I can *feel* it! I can feel my toes!"

Amy did not know what to do.

"Jesus Christ! All the doctors were wrong!" Luis surged up

out of his chair and collapsed onto the floor. He pushed himself back up with his arms, but his legs were useless.

Rocket laid down next to him, excited about all the noise.

"Help me up," said Luis. "I feel so weird." One of his legs was spasming. It was like the first few months after he got back from the hospital, when he was convinced every phantom sensation caused by errant neurons meant that he would walk again.

"Jesus, Amy! I can feel my legs! Come here and help me!"

Amy thought that maybe she understood what was happening.

She wanted to be gone.

**S**eriously?" asked Rich. "You want *all* of them?"

"Yeah."

"I don't even know how to count that."

Amy shrugged.

"I mean, I know we've got over a thousand in there." He paused. They were in the break room. Rich still looked stunned to see her on her day off. Brittany's voice leaked back from the front of the store. It sounded like she was flirting with the skaters who hung out in the parking lot.

"What are you going to do with a thousand crickets? This is awfully expensive if you're just going to let them go."

At a dime a cricket, this was expensive. It would wipe out the part of her paycheck she usually reserved for paying back student loans.

"Well," she said. "Add in my employee discount."

Rich just looked at her. "Fine," he said. "I guess." He turned back to his paperwork. "I mean, it's weird, but whatever. Have Brittany ring it up."

Amy headed to the front of the store. The skater boys clustered around Brittany like a flock of birds, all of them singing courtship songs and spreading their plumage for her to admire. Amy waited for a pause in their chatter before she broke in among them.

"Brit?"

It took Brittany a moment to look away from a boy wearing bright red eyeliner.

"Brit, I need you to ring up some crickets for me."

"How many?" Brittany flipped her hair. The boys were watching.

"All of them."

"What?"

"Rich said to round it to a thousand."

"Oh." Brittany pursed her glossy lips. "I don't really like... touching... the crickets."

Amy felt grateful. "That's fine. Just ring it up, and I'll take the whole tub. Don't worry, I'll bring the container back tomorrow morning."

Brittany wrinkled her nose. "Okay." Amy picked up the glass aquarium they housed the crickets in and set it on the counter. The sight of more than a thousand insects crawling all over each other was sufficiently strange to distract the skaters from Brittany for a few seconds.

Brittany frowned and rang up the sale. The crickets' distress was palpable; they had not seen direct sunlight since they left the farm in Georgia where they were raised.

Not that they remembered so far back.

"Wow," said Brittany. "A thousand crickets. So, after tax and your discount, that's \$90.74. Did you just buy a lizard or something?"

"Yeah. My boyfriend's brother didn't want his bearded dragon anymore, so he gave it to us."

"It must be...hungry."

Brittany leaned over to tap the glass. The crickets started screaming. Amy picked the whole container up, shielding it from Brittany and the boys, and walked out to her car.

Luis was out of his chair and sprawled on the couch watching TV when she got home.

"What," he asked, "the hell is that?"

"Crickets."

"Crickets? Why did you bring home a billion crickets?"

"Move your leg," Amy ordered.

"That's not funny."

"Try."

Luis put on a look of deep concentration, not hugely different from the expression he wore when they were about to attempt to make love. Nothing usually happened then, either.

Amy took the screen lid off the aquarium. Immediately a few of the crickets escaped, disappearing under the bed and skittering to the room's corners.

"Hold my hand," she ordered. Luis pressed his palm against hers, and she pulled him towards her until she could smell him.

She waited for the feeling of warmth.

"Jesus," said Luis. "Those crickets are getting *everywhere*." He put the lid back on. "We're going to be finding their dead little bodies for weeks."

"Just look at me. Look right in my eyes."

Luis did. They held the box of crickets between them, but there was no tension there. She did not feel pregnant with heat as she had before with Rocket between them. She clutched Luis's hand tighter.

One of the crickets completed a frantic sprint across the carpet to shelter underneath the wheels of Luis's chair. She could hear its panic, so high-pitched it seemed to catch in the bones of her face and vibrate. Outside there were birds, squirrels, and chipmunks; the creatures who kept winter from being as bleak as she always believed it would be. Things were never *truly* quiet.

Luis wiggled one of his toes.

Amy yanked her hands out of his and took the lid off the aquarium again. She dumped the hundreds of crickets over their heads. A piece of egg carton caught in Luis's hair. The crickets' panic swelled.

"Jesus," shrieked Luis. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

She could feel crickets caught in her hair, a few of them clinging to her skin with the tiny barbs on their legs. They were inside her clothes. Luis squirmed in his chair, trying to knock them away. One of the crickets clung to her lips, and Amy opened her mouth and caught it with her tongue. She bit down, catching it right between her molars. The cricket's body gushed inside her mouth, salty and bitter.

But the horde was quiet by one more voice.

Amy caught Luis's face between her hands and pulled him forward, pressing her lips to his. They were chapped, pressed

tightly together, but when he opened them to protest she thrust half of the cricket's chewed-up body between them.

She swallowed the other half like a pill and covered Luis's mouth with her palm.

"Eat it," she whispered. Luis looked so strange. Maybe it was the situation that was strange. Maybe everything would finally be okay.

Luis swallowed.

She kissed him again, no tricks this time, pressing her tongue against his teeth, wishing she could suck out his essence and swallow it whole.

That feeling of heat and then *life* started growing inside her, starting with the cricket in her belly. It pulsed outwards. Maybe it was years of watching daytime television that made her picture it as white light. Maybe that was what it actually was.

Luis returned her kiss, less with passion than desperation.

The crickets on their bodies died. Amy was stretched as thin as she'd ever been. She heard all those small animals in the woods and front yards and parking lots around them, and deeper than that she heard neighborhood cats on the prowl and rabbits sleeping down in their dens. She was more aware of life than she had ever been, as if every hippie was right and they were all really connected by one great web. She felt along the tendrils of that web, testing the energy, and began to redirect it. She could hear Rocket gated in the kitchen, miserable with all of his being that Amy and Luis were together and he was one room over instead of with them.

First the crickets died, and then the death spread outward.

Rocket howled.

"Jesus Christ," said Luis. "Oh God." He chanted like he used to chant when they had sex, but now the tone was fearful instead of orgasmic. "Oh God."

Too late, Amy realized how little control she had over what was going on. The crickets were not going to be enough to make Luis walk again.

Rocket howled again.

"No!" yelled Amy. "Not my dog!"

But Rocket faded just as the crickets had. The silence spread throughout their apartment complex, into the copse of trees. There were no more cats, no more squirrels, no more brave robins or flocks of sparrows. She had killed everything.

Amy sobbed.

"Oh God," said Luis. "I can feel my legs." He wheeled away from her, then moved his feet from their footrests to the floor. His atrophied legs supported his weight for only a moment before collapsing underneath him, but when he tried to move them, they kept jerking.

"My legs!" he yelled. There were dead crickets squished against the front of his shirt. "Amy! You did it! My fucking *legs*!"

Amy walked over to the kitchen and looked down at Rocket, lying down on the floor, the angle of his body subtly wrong for sleep. Rocket, who was everything. She would have dumped Luis and married Rocket instead, if that was the sort of thing that people did.

"I'm going to walk again," said Luis, the words like a prayer. "I'm going to walk!"

Amy left. She went outside, leaving Luis talking to himself and Rocket terribly still, to see how far the silence stretched. ■





Jim has spent a lot of his working life as a screenwriter, from *EastEnders* to *Play For Today*, from the BBC version of the *Apollo 13* story to *Space 1999*. This is his third story for *Interzone* and it comes out of a writer's deep misgivings about the current industry's obsession with its technology rather than its humanity.

## DIGITAL RITES by JIM HAWKINS

EXT. GREECE — PALEOKASTRITSA — DAY

Amber Holiday lies on her immaculate stomach and looks out from the swimming pool high on the Corfu cliffs at Bella Vista. She knows the cameraman she can see in her peripheral vision wasn't taking snapshots of the spectacular views over the rugged coastline of Paleokastritsa. He isn't interested in the roof of the Monestario, couldn't care less about the silver-encrusted iconostasis inside, is unimpressed by the perfect blue and turquoise Ionian Sea lapping gently into the sea caves in the sandstone strata far below. All he is interested in is the moment when she unhooks her bikini top, slips into the water for a quick plunge to perk up her nipples, climbs out, and stands glistening by the side of the pool like a newborn Athena bathed in the golden light of the sun that is dropping ever faster towards the open sea to the west.

Paparazzi! She has lived her life surrounded by paparazzi the way a dead dog lives its death surrounded by blowflies. Maybe now she'd given him a good angle on her tits he'd crawl off to whatever pathetic stone he lived under and leave her alone. No chance.

Knowing it is futile, she pulls her mobile phone out of her bag and speed-dials Dave Marchant, the studio's Media Relations boss.

"All I wanted was ten days of peace!" she shouts into the phone. "I've been here forty-eight hours and I'm up to my boobs in telephoto lenses!"

"Not me, Julie. Defo not me."

"Lying shit. Get these pap scum off me! And don't call me Julie."

Marchant sighs and says, "Julie – I've told you before. Paparazzi come with the job. In fact, paparazzi *are* the job."

Amber Holiday, aka Julia Simpson, throws the phone into her bag and looks around. There is no sign of the photographer.

EXT. GREECE –  
PALEOKASTRITSA ROAD –  
21:05 BST

The narrow road from Bella Vista down to the harbour is steep, narrow and winding with sheer drops of several hundred feet and blind bends. The gap between the ochre road-edge markings and the low fences is very narrow. Dune buggies are fragile – just an open tubular frame and an engine on big wheels. Amber's hired buggy is bright yellow. She looks like an exotic caged parrot, her cool sea-green silk top rippling in the breeze.

She has no chance to see the black Mercedes coming up fast behind her until it's too late. The impact throws her back against her seat. She yanks far too hard on the steering wheel, goes right towards the cliff edge, and overcompensates. The buggy slams over to the left, ricochets off the rock wall, veers across the road, and breaks through the cliff fence.

Caged birds can't fly far – not unless they're angry and forget to fasten their seatbelts. Like a diver from an eight-hundred feet high-board, Amber Holiday flies a perfect arc out of her cage, her arms spread as though pleading for wings, her unblemished skin with its careful factor twenty sun-block reflecting the deep red of the setting sun, her beautifully-chiselled Oscar-winning face turning in the evening air, and the goddess of a million tabloid pages, a zillion web-hits, blogs beyond count and infinite adolescent wet-dreams hits the terrace of an apartment block, explodes, and turns into something resembling a spatchcocked chicken in a red wine sauce.

EXT. GREECE – CORFU TOWN STREET – NIGHT

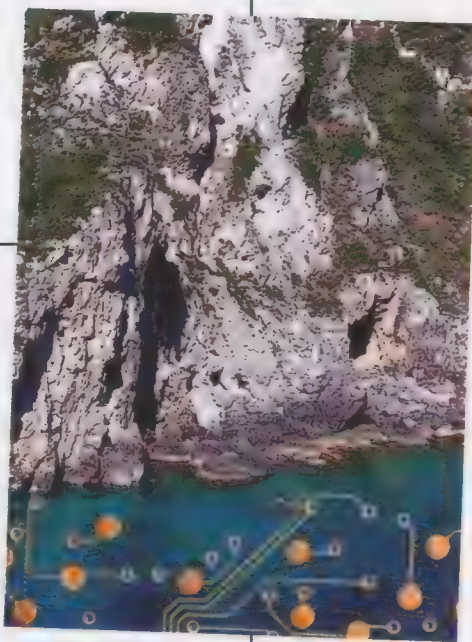
Police Lieutenant Spiros Koukoulades is strolling with his wife Maria down the dark and moody Venetian lanes of Corfu Town towards his favourite taverna, trying to divert her attention from the fur and silver shops, when Constable Alexandros Fotos runs towards them and stops, panting. Maria looks away. Spiros stands like a block of stone and says, "Alexi – what?"

Alexandros takes a deep breath and says, "A woman went off the cliff above Paleokastritsa this evening. She's dead."

"So?"

Maria turns back, fixes the constable with an uncompromising black-eyed stare and says, "My husband is not on duty tonight."

Alexandros would rather have faced a rioting mob in his underpants than face Maria Koukoulades, but he stands up straight and says to his boss, "Major Panagakos sent me to find you. Your mobile is switched off. The woman who died is a



tourist. Major Panagakos told me to respectfully tell you to turn your mobile on and phone him immediately."

Spiros walks away into the shadows, flicking his mobile phone open. Maria sniffs and looks Alexandros up and down and says, "You're Demetria's son, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I told her not to let any of her sons join the police. Are you ambitious? Do you want promotion?"

"Yes, madam."

"Then you can look forward to an angry wife and hungry Sunday nights. What's so important about a dead tourist? Tourists fall off cliffs every day of the week."

Maria's stare and half-smile are strangely disturbing. She is a predator surveying prey and an erotic challenge. In the shadows of the five hundred year old street Spiros is facing the wall and talking quietly into his mobile.

"The thing is," Alexandros says, "it turns out she might be famous."

INT./EXT. PINWOOD STUDIOS – 19:00 BST

Earlier.

It's nine o'clock in the evening in Greece but only seven o'clock in England on a fine July day. Puffy white clouds and softly-vanishing feathery vapour trails catch the gentle light and smile down at crowded pub-garden benches and children laughing as they ride on their last higher and higher push on the park swings. Blackbirds forage for worms between the trees. Midges and fruit-flies emerge in the branches and assemble like fighter squadrons planning their attack on the lakes of wine and beer on the tables below. Of all the possible delights of summer, there is none more perfect than a warm July evening in England.

None of this is visible inside the vast ugly, dark, heavily-guarded and hermetically-sealed hangar that is the centre of operations of FlashWorks Productions. Gone are the old sound-stages. Gone are the lighting rigs, brutes, booms and make-up trolleys. No champagne pops, no stars hang on dressing-room doors. As Eliot wrote in *The Waste Land*: "The nymphs are departed."

Inside this building there is never sunshine unless a script calls for it, and then it's the fake light of artifice.

We are the CAMERA as it tracks through lonely pools of cool halogen light past the steel-clad reinforced block containing four thousand and ninety-six clusters of massively-parallel computers, each of which contains one thousand and twenty-four super-conducting quantum cores. Coils of foil-wrapped liquid helium pipes enter the roof of the block like the snake-hair of Medusa, calming the qubits into submission. Power lines from the sub-station outside hum. *And no birds sing.*

CAMERA continues to track through the gloom – past the

Administration Block, now silent and unlit on a Sunday evening – towards the studios. Thirty-two spheres stretch in rows to the distant darkness. Each sphere has a diameter of twenty-four metres and hangs from an umbilical cord of cables and coolants. Each sphere is wrapped in golden foil, for no particular reason apart from impressing the investors. Around the equator of each sphere there is a ring of luminous colour. Black equals empty. Blue equals maintenance. Green equals powering up. Orange equals rehearsal. Red equals TAKE and may not be interrupted by anybody.

Seven of the studios are active. In Studio Two Sharon Lightly is directing Amber Holiday in scene forty-six. In Studio Five Don Fairchild is directing Amber Holiday and Tarquin Beloff in scene six. In Studio Six Rachel Palmer is directing Amber Holiday and Tarquin Beloff in scene ninety-seven. In Studio Eleven Greg Waleski is directing Angel Argent and Tarquin Beloff in scene fifteen. All these studios are at status orange.

Only one equator glows red.

CAMERA slows its track down the long dark aisle, turns towards Studio Nineteen, and...

#### INT. PINEWOOD STUDIO 19 – 19:00 BST

Jack Rogers seems to float on his director's chair half-way up one wall of the enclosing sphere. He is at a high angle above what seems to be a city street in London. The curving walls of the studio are invisible. He sees tower-blocks and traffic. He sees light snow drifting from the upper right. Traffic lights flash and the buses make bright cones of the falling flakes in their headlight beams.

He stretches his arm out and slowly brings his flattened hand downwards. The viewpoint drifts down. He is the camera. He sees for us. He is dream-flying above this street, but what he sees, we will see.

We drift lower until we are close to Oxford Circus tube station. Snowflakes drift past the viewpoint. Crowds from every nation on Earth struggle to walk in the press of people. There's traffic noise, shouting, and Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* playing as a holding music track.

And there she is. Amber Holiday walks out of the tube station and pulls the fur-lined hood up on her coat. She shivers, turns, and begins to fight her way through the crowds eastwards, towards Soho.

Jack says, "Follow. Keep her in the right-hand segment," and the camera moves to the left with her.

Jack says, "Push in slowly," and the camera closes in on her deep blue eyes. She smiles. It's a big smile. And then her smile bends and curls into a snarl. Snot runs from her nose. Her eyes squeeze shut in pain. She falls to the floor, inert.

Jack shouts, "Cut!" and everything freezes. The traffic, the crowds, the noise, the buses, the taxis and the music simply stop.

#### INT. PINEWOOD STUDIO 6 – 19:00 BST

Rachel Palmer has long dark curly hair, intense blue eyes, a 'don't mess with me' attitude, and she's having a hard time with the actors. Tarquin Beloff is impossibly handsome. The

computers have enhanced his pectoral muscles, which through the gap in his open-neck shirt look as though he could destroy tower-blocks with a swipe of his hand.

"I agree with Amber," he says in his carefully melded accent of Russia, Boston and BBC. "It's a really bad line."

"Tarquin," says Rachel, "your opinion is valuable but I am actually talking to Amber here, so take a break." Somewhere in the computer hub Tarquin's user interface state-machine begins an infinite loop on its current node and he shuts up. That doesn't stop several thousand other tasks in his entity cluster from reading and analysing books, paintings, music and internet porn in search of a deeper simulacrum of humanity.

Very patiently Rachel says, "Okay, Amber. So what exactly is your problem with the line?"

"I can't say 'Don't kiss me. You can fuck me, but you can't kiss me. I'm not ready for kissing – yet.'" Amber deploys her brand-new secret smile. "It's inconsistent with my character profile. Kissing is an early stage and fucking comes later."

Rachel sits back in her Director's chair and thinks for a moment. "The thing is, Amber," she says, "what you're saying is true for your inherited characteristics. Obviously Julie likes a bit of tongue-play before she feels like opening-up, and so do I. But we're doing acting, remember, and you have to adjust your parameters and weightings to accept that this is the way your character, Alice, feels about things. It makes her a little bit distinct from Julie and me. Maybe she values the tenderness of a kiss above body-touching and physical sexuality. Maybe she wants tenderness to be the goal and not the trigger. Just think about it."

Amber thinks about it for seven microseconds and says, "Okay – I've got that superimposition in place and I think I can do it but I'm not sure about the tone. Is it aggressive or seductive or hurt or confused or neutral or venomous...?"

Rachel interrupts her. "I don't want a list. Just update Alice and we'll try it. Tarquin, come back."

Tarquin's state machine receives the notification message and breaks out of its loop. His immobile features begin to move. He appears to breathe. He blinks. His lips are clean and moist.

"Take it from the top," Rachel says.

Tarquin takes Amber in his arms and moves his mouth towards hers. She turns away enough to evade his kiss and says, "Don't kiss me. You can fuck me, but you can't kiss me. I'm not ready for kissing – yet."

Rachel smiles and says, "Not bad, darlings. Not at all bad. Quite effective and affecting. Just one thing, Amber..."

"Yes?"

"Lose the smile."

Amber's smile bends and curls into a snarl. Snot runs from her nose. Her eyes squeeze shut in pain. She falls to the floor, inert.

Seconds later, Tarquin goes catatonic, and his image fades to noise.

#### MONTAGE – INT. PINEWOOD STUDIOS – EVENING

A siren begins to wail. Red emergency lights flash outside the control room.

Rachel, Jack and other directors run down the long gloomy

aisle from their capsule towards the control room. Jack leads the pack and punches the digits on the security keypad, and he's first through the heavy door.

"What the fuck's going on?" Jack shouts. Senior Operations Manager Sunil Gupta is leaning over the shoulders of two console operators. Their touch-panels are Christmas trees of flashing red icons.

EXT. UKRAINE — KIEV —  
EVENING

It's a very warm summer night in Kiev. Crowds sit outside cafes and bars. The moon reflects off the rippling surface of the Dnepr River. A dark shape bobs gently down stream, turning slowly in the current. Tarquin Beloff aka Alexandr Bondarenko is physically untouched. He has no wounds, no appearance of damage. His handsome features surface and turn down again into the moonlit flow. His only problem is that his lungs are full of water and he's dead.



dance a sirtaki in the aisle between the tables. Corfu is awash with men called Spiros after the island's patron saint, Agios Spyridon. Their legs swing back and forward and around. They touch their heels and then their toes. They jump down to a crouch and then spin and rise, their arms spread wide.

Dimitris, the owner, sprays barbecue lighter fuel from a bottle onto the floor and ignites it. Blue and orange flames flicker as Spiros and Spiros dance through fire and camera flashes.

The policemen wait on the side of the road, watching, until the dance finishes, and then skirt the tables and walk into the interior of the taverna. Dimitris gestures for them to follow, and leads the way through to the apartment block and up the stairs to the swimming pool level and the rooms.

Room 101 is at the end of the corridor. A SLIPPERY FLOOR sign bars the way. Joe, the barman, keeps guard on the end of the corridor. He's looking pale.

Dimitris hands the master key to Spiros, and they go in.

INT. GREECE CORFU — POLICE CAR — NIGHT

The corporeal remains of Julia Simpson aka Amber Holiday have been bagged and sent to the mortuary in Corfu Town. Spiros and Alexandros are driving back to Corfu Town along dark, dangerous twisty roads which weave between Cyprus trees and olive groves. Spiros' mobile rings. He listens for a few seconds and gestures to Alexandros, who performs a risky three-point turn and accelerates.

EXT. GREECE CORFU — AGIOS STEFANOS NW — NIGHT

Agios Stefanos is not the teenage shot-glass hell of Kavos to the south. It's not the fish-and-chip zone of Sidari to the north. Once the tiny fishing port for the village of Avliotes which perches high on the surrounding hills, it's a modern cluster of apartment blocks, tavernas, and bars. It has no disco. Self-respecting numb-your-mind under twenties would hate it. The beach is a long crescent of golden sand and gently-lapping Ionian Sea. Tourists know it as San Stefanos — allegedly renamed by package holiday company Thomson so that reps at the airport wouldn't keep sending clients to either of the other two Agios Stefanos on the island.

Alexandros drives into the centre of the village and parks outside The Little Prince apartments and taverna. The terrace restaurant area is busy. Cameras flash as Michalis (Mike) delivers Sizzling Steak to tables near the road. The platter steams and spits, and he wears a plastic bib. Michalis hates serving Sizzling Steak, but it's tonight's special.

As Spiros and Alexandros leave the car and walk towards the restaurant the lights dim a little, and another Spiros, who is a waiter, and yet another Spiros, who is also a waiter, begin to

INT. GREECE AGIOS STEFANOS NW—ROOM 101—NIGHT

Angel Argent, aka Audrey Turner, lies on the floor face down. She's wearing a black bikini. An empty bottle of sleeping pills and a half-empty bottle of Metaxa are side-by-side on the work surface. Her dark brown hair is spread out around her head like a deep shadow.

Spiros says, "Skata!" — which roughly translates to *Oh shit!* — and turns to Dimitris. "How did you find her?"

"It's a change-over day. People on night flights can get an extension to the late afternoon. One of the maids came into to prepare this room by mistake. By the way, her friend hasn't turned up yet tonight. They had a bit of a row this morning."

"What's his name?"

"Not him — her. Julia Simpson."

Alexandros and Spiros exchange one of those looks between policemen which contain the unspoken words 'night' and 'long'.

"Alexi," Spiros says, "radio in and get a science team here as fast as possible. And bring some security tape from the car. Dimitri — be so kind as to keep this area sterile and put two Sizzling Steaks on to cook!"

INT. CONFERENCE AREA — PINWOOD STUDIOS —  
NIGHT

Sunil Gupta is ending his presentation to an assembly of directors, producers, executive producers, and most importantly, Lynne Songbird, who owns the studio, the actors, the staff, FlashWorks, an executive jet or two, and houses in LA, Glasgow, London, Paris and Bangalore. Sunil is scared. Lynne is volatile. Lynne kicks punch-bags with bare toes for exercise. He wants some good news, but there isn't any.



art by **BEN BALDWIN** (Black Static #26 • December)

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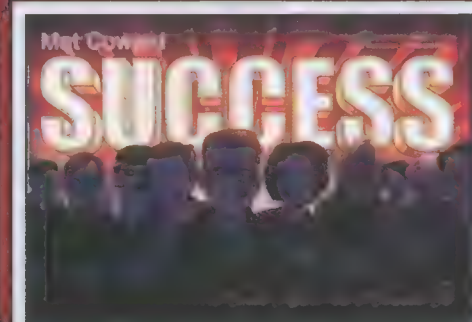
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"So basically," Sunil says nervously, "we've lost quantum entanglement to five key actor brains – all within minutes of each other."

"Keep the heid!" Lynne says, reverting to the Scottish idiom for *stay calm*. "How can that happen?"

Sunil points to a diagram on his electronic whiteboard. "We can only come to two conclusions: either the laws of physics have changed today, or these people are dead."

Jack's been in the corner talking on his smart-phone. He comes over into the light of the whiteboard projector. "I phoned Angel's mobile again," he says. "A policeman on Corfu answered it. Amber drove off a cliff. Angel took an overdose."

"And?" Lynne asks.

"This many brains gone within minutes of each other? Looks to me like we're under attack."

There's a long pause as Lynne's blue eyes track across the room. "Jack, Sunil, Rachel, Jason – stay here. Everybody else goes home, but keep your phones on and be ready to go anywhere at very short notice. Thank you."

When the room empties Lynne points to some seats and pours herself coffee from the flask near the whiteboard. Nobody says a word. Eventually Lynne sits down and says, "Okay. We need to be clear about this. Jack – you're senior director on this movie. How much have we got?"

Jack is in his mid-thirties. He has unfashionably long hair and a patrician English private school accent, despite the fact that he went to a crummy comprehensive in Bolton. "If we include some marginal takes," he says, "I'd say we've got about eighty per cent of it. Just a guess. We'll have to do a slash edit."

Lynne turns to Rachel, who is the second ranking director. "Rachel, do you agree with that?"

Rachel nods.

"So," Lynne asks, "my first question is, can we finish it? We've got vast information from the actors on the computers. Haven't we, Sunil?"

Sunil hates this. He avoids eye-contact with the others. "Yes, we have," he says quietly.

Lynne walks over and stands in his eye-line. "You don't sound very sure," she says. "Why can't we finish the movie using the personalities we have?"

"We probably can," Sunil says.

"How big or small is 'probably'?"

Sunil puts his forefinger and thumb into a sign for small.

Lynne steps away and takes a breath. "I'm very stupid," she says. "We spend two billion Euros to get the most advanced movie-making system ever devised. We collect Oscars the way people get loyalty points in supermarkets. We hire some beautiful people with zero acting talent, hijack their brains, and then I forget that they're human. They can die. We didn't protect them. We're gobshite."

The blue eyes are unexpectedly wet. Jack's smartphone buzzes and he swipes the screen with his finger. "Two more," he says. "They're taking out everybody."

Lynne spins around and kicks a chair across the room. "Well fuck them!" she shouts. "This is fucking war! Jack and Rachel, see if we can rescue the movie. Sunil, get the whole of your technical team on it."

Sunil has his head in his hands, gazing at the grey carpet.

"Fine," he says. "But we may have another problem."

Lynne picks up the broken chair, sets it down very carefully, and says, "This is absolutely the time I need to know everything. What is it I don't know?"

#### EXT. LUTON AIRPORT – NIGHT

A white Learjet 85 is lined-up on the apron at the west end of the runway next to the white terminator markers, trembling in the wash of a Whizz Air 737 bound for Prague winding its engines up to take-off thrust. The 737 rolls away down the runway, its wingtip lights flashing brightly; it rotates and lifts off.

The cabin lights are dim in the Learjet, but we can still see Lynne and her PA Jason sipping coffee. There's busy radio chatter from the control tower, and then the Learjet begins to move, turning into the long reach of black tarmac, accelerates, lifts into the air, and flies southwards across Germany and the Alps, down the Italian coast past Venice and Brindisi towards Corfu.

#### INT./EXT. LEARJET – CORFU – DAWN

Lynne is sleeping as the plane descends from thirty-seven thousand feet to five thousand and follows the track down the Adriatic towards the islands that mark the north-westerly points of Greece. To their left the flight crew can see the rocky coast of Albania. Jason wakes Lynne with coffee and fruit juice. Orange dawn light is flaring over the mountains to the east.

Danny Edwards, the head of security, doesn't sleep much. He's sitting in his seat just behind the pilots, patched into the studio's hi-tech and probably illegal network of satellite systems. He's drinking herbal tea, which he hates, and the nicotine patch on his arm itches. He has his headset on and he's calling in the return of a few favours, plus a liberal sprinkling of Euros. Sunil is sitting beside him, monitoring the exotic equipment in the hold.

The Learjet pilots have a few words with the tower at Ioannis Kapodistrias airport, lower their landing gear, extend the flaps, and descend to fifteen hundred feet. It's a bumpy ride as the wind that brought the heroes of the Odyssey home to Greece takes them down the west coast of Corfu. The dark green mountains of the island are to the left. The Ionian Sea, plunging to a depth of sixteen thousand feet, is to the right. They fly past the villages of Agios Stefanos, where Angel died, then Arillas, Agios Giorgios, and Paleokastritsa, where Amber died. The beaches are all in shadow. The gods are asleep, even Korkyra, the beautiful nymph whom Poseidon abducted and married, and who gives her name to the island: Kerkyra.

They turn left and make their approach over the hills to the runway, which is a spit reaching out into the sea. They pass over a white-painted church on a small island. They touch down and savage the dawn peace with reverse thrust.

#### INT. MORTUARY CORFU – DAY

Spiros has seen a great deal of sudden death in his career as a policeman, but he still hates post-mortems. He hates the bitter charring smell of bone-saws. He hates the calm evisceration, the digital scales, the organs, the dissection of somebody who

laughed and loved into a scrap-heap of components. He's sweating.

The mortuary in the new blue and white-painted hospital in Kontokali, just north of the town centre, is state of the art. Amber's mangled body lies naked on one stainless steel slab and Angel's perfect dark-haired beauty lies on the next, although she's not so good-looking with her scalp peeled back. Spiros is pleased to be behind glass in the observation area and not up-close and intimate with the body fluids. He's even more pleased when his mobile phone rings and the head of the prefecture orders him to halt the post-mortem. His pleasure doesn't last long.

The pathology-trained surgeon speaks clearly into her microphone. "This is highly unusual," she says. She has just trepanned Angel's skull, exposing the membrane of the brain surface. "The *dura mater* is bright blue."

Spiros barges his way through the door into the room. "Stamata!" he says. *Stop*. "Refrigerate the bodies and wait for instructions. And don't ask. Politics!"

FAST FORWARD thirty minutes, and Spiros, Selina Mariatos the acting pathologist, Lynne and her team and a senior police officer are sitting in a meeting area drinking cold lemon-tea from a vending machine. Spiros swills his down, crushes the can and throws it very accurately into a recycling bin. "So?" he demands. "We're conducting an investigation. We are not open to interference."

"That's the last thing we want to do, Mr Koukoulades," Lynne says. "We think we can help. In fact we know we can help. The thing is, this is time-critical. We have a few hours at most."

"Make your case quickly, then. As the investigating officer, I will decide whether you are helping or...something else."

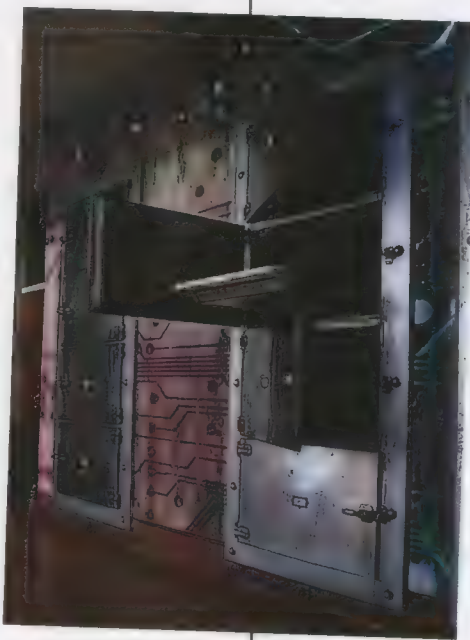
Lynne stands up and walks to the window. "What I'm going to tell you," she says "is highly confidential."

Spiros laughs, and says, "I have two dead film-stars. Everything I do is going to be reported across the world. If you have something to tell me, then tell me. But *you* don't decide what is confidential. Is that clear?"

He doesn't flinch when Lynne turns and opens her eyes wide and looks into his – blue on brown. He's used to tough women. He married one. "You have two dead film-stars. We have five. This is no accident, officer. This is conspiracy and murder. We need your help, and believe me, you need ours."

Danny's looking at his smartphone. "It's six actors now," he says. "Can we get moving?"

FAST FORWARD twenty minutes and Sunil and Selina are having a nerd-fest in the dissection area as the equipment from the Learjet is wheeled in. They are thirty years old, almost exactly the same olive-skinned colour and both good-looking in reasonably dim light. They are both isolated from the human race around them by their considerable knowledge. Selina throws a plastic coverall to him. He puts it on, and then says,



"You'll have to be kind to me. I'm not used to bodies." She pokes him in the chest and says, "You've got one."

"I may be sick."

"D'you think I care about sick? If you're sick I'll scrape it up and tell you what you had for lunch three days ago. Now – why is Angel's brain blue?"

"You'll see."

Sunil opens the aluminium carry boxes and arranges what look like sixteen small satellite dishes on work surfaces on either side of the slabs and across the room. He fixes a UK to Continental electric socket adapter to the plug on the power lead from a heavy black control console and connects it to the mains supply. The console has a flat matt-black square surface on its top, but when he flicks the on-switch the surface glows a deep ultramarine, pales, and rises up to

make a translucent sixteen-inch cube of light aqua, as though the colour has stretched and attenuated.

"You have agreed," Sunil says, "that the video remains confidential."

"It must be available to the inquest. That's the law."

"Selina," Sunil says, "I'll share everything with you. There is nothing else like this anywhere in the world. But what happens to the evidence is out of our control. There are many things I can't tell you yet. But I promise you, we will work together and we will share things that may perhaps not reach the final report. There will be no lies, but some things will remain obscure. Do we have that agreement?"

"I will make my decision later," Selina says.

The mortuary assistant brings the bodies in their body bags with a trolley one by one and lays them on the dissection slabs. He opens the bags and slides the bodies onto the tables. Sunil feels a flush cover his face. His heart is beating very fast. Amber's body is a wreck. Every bone is broken. She's strangely short – truncated by the impact with the ground. Her skull is split open diagonally from above her left ear down to the bottom of the right jaw. Much of her brain is missing. What is left is discoloured – hints of green and turquoise amongst the pink and grey.

Selina puts her arm around Sunil. "This is *my* science," she says. "Now you do *yours* and you'll feel better. We do it for them. I don't know if they're on their way to an afterlife or nothing. But we *will* find the truth of their last seconds. I'm going to start recording now." She gestures to the assistant to leave the room and presses the record button on the console.

"This is the continuing investigation into of the death of Julia Jane Simpson, a British National found dead in Paleokastritsa. I will continue this narrative in English and Greek for the benefit of Doctor Sunil Gupta, who is also present."

INT. CAR – CORFU – DAY

Spiros and Danny Edwards have reached an unspoken agree-

ment. Spiros drives at seventy miles per hour along spiralling mountain roads and Danny doesn't shit himself, even when Spiros leans heavily on the brakes of his BMW to avoid massacring a herd of goats which has meandered across the tarmac.

"We're off the record. Agreed?" Spiros asks, having softened Danny up with a constantly-changing array of G-forces. Danny agrees that they're off the record.

"On any one day a tourist drives off a cliff," Spiros continues. "On any one day somebody takes an overdose. Holidays can be emotional. We have established that Amber and Angel – to use their public names – were lesbian lovers. They had an argument that morning at breakfast. Amber went off to Paleo, on her own, and drove off the cliff. Angel took an overdose, which is what lovers often do when things go wrong. Would I be wrong to assume the simple explanation?"

"No," says Danny. "But when six people who work for us die within hours of each other, would I be wrong to assume that we're looking at murder?"

"You're not ex-military, I think. You're not ex-police. Your manner tells me you're almost certainly ex-security, probably MI5. Are my instincts wrong?"

"No."

The road to The Golden Fox high above Paleokastritsa is cordoned off. A policeman moves the NO ENTRY sign aside and Spiros drives slowly to a point where burnt rubber marks the road. A camera is set up on a tripod and the operator is leaning against the rocks away from the cliff edge, smoking. He stubs it out quickly when he sees Spiros and Danny get out of the car. Danny paces on the road – walks up twenty yards, then thirty, walks back, shading his eyes from the fierce July sun that's high over the sea. Spiros says nothing. He gestures to the cameraman, who takes out a packet of Karelia cigarettes and offers one to Spiros. Smoke curls into the air as Danny paces and paces again. Danny's fair-haired and his skin is rapidly turning pink in the intense light. Finally he walks up to Spiros.

"She was a careful, timid driver. She wasn't going fast – maximum twenty-five miles an hour. She steers into the bend towards the cliff, brakes hard, veers to the left, hits the rocks, bounces off and loses control. She floors the brakes as she heads to the cliff edge. She goes over."

The cameraman nods and says, "Ne!" Yes. Spiros holds his hand up and says, "Shh. I want to hear Mr Edwards' conclusions."

"May I have a cigarette?" Danny asks. The cameraman throws the pack of Karelias to Danny, and then the lighter. Danny draws deeply on the cigarette. "Two weeks," he says. "Two miserable fucking weeks without a cigarette and then this happens. Anyway – looks to me like she was shunted."

Spiros leads Danny up the road towards The Golden Fox, where Amber had her last swim. "All these deaths," he says. "I have to be objective, obviously. When the top executives of a film company fly in overnight and start spending big money, I have to think that they've got something to hide. I was at the post-mortem and the pathologist said there were some anomalies in the brains of the dead girls. So an alternative hypothesis might be that you did something to them which went terribly wrong."

Spiros' mobile phone rings. He listens for a few seconds, says,

"Endaxi," and snaps the phone shut.

Danny is standing by the roadside looking down at the pale wakes of the little boats weaving their way between the rocky bays far below. "A beautiful place to die," he says.

Spiros comes and stands beside him and asks, "Did Clytemnestra really stab Agamemnon to death in his bath? Maybe he slipped and hit his head, but that was too dull a story. It sounds stupid, but that's why I became a policeman. Old stories. Anyway, I've had the dune buggy thoroughly examined and there are traces of black paint on the left hand rear side."

Danny takes a last drag on his cigarette and grinds the stub with his foot.

"So," Spiros says, "let's see if we can find any traces of a black car at the taverna."

"CCTV?" Danny asks.

Spiros laughs.

#### INT. MORTUARY CORFU – DAY

Selina has dissected the remains of Amber's brain, weighed them, but before she slices the tissue she places them on a glass plate away from the body. Sunil adjusts the array of dishes, checking frequently with read-outs on his control console.

She comes and stands beside him, speaking quietly. "You must explain, for the record. If you don't, I will never work again."

"You can come and work for us," Sunil says.

"Your film company has a lot of opportunities for part-time pathologists? I don't think so."

"Unfortunately, this week it does." He moves away from the console and stands carefully facing away from the bodies and the pile of brain tissue.

"Okay," he says. "Background. Cinema is the only art that totally depends on technology. That's its greatest strength and also a curse. People drifted away from actual cinemas when TV took off. The big studios are closely tied-in with the distributors and theatre owners. They want people back in the cinemas. They want to sell seats and popcorn. That's why 3D got so heavily sold at the end of the first decade of the century.

"The technology isn't that good. People who don't wear spectacles don't like wearing them, and people who do don't like having to fix another set over the top of their prescription lenses. Ten percent of people can't see the effect anyway. Still, whizz bang, latest thing.

"We're a small production company. We don't like being at the beck and call of some inflated ego talking poolside in Malibu. Particularly Lynne. Her ancestors were so scary the Romans built a ten metre wall to keep them in. So, to cut to the chase, we invested – well, she invested – in technology. We are miles ahead of the game. We can now deliver a better experience in your sitting room than you'll ever get in a cinema."

Selina paces. "So how does that relate to these poor dead women?" she asks.

"We can generate direct brain stimulation to the audience. You can live it, feel it, and experience it emotionally. So we can create this, we borrow the brains of our actors – with their full agreement. We inject them with some harmless nano and similar equipment to this sets up a kind of quantum entanglement.

We use some of their brain centres without them being aware."

"How do you know it's harmless?" the pathologist demands.

"We've done animal trials, human trials – it has no effect."

"Does that cause the blue colouration?"

"Probably. After exposure to air."

"Sunil, I'll believe you for now, but you may have to prove that to the Examining Magistrate."

"Fine. Now – we should not wait too long."

Selina gestures to the equipment. "Describe," she says.

Sunil presses some buttons on the console. The light in the translucent cube flickers. "I'm attempting to re-entangle the nano," he says. "I'm recording these data for the report." Suddenly the segments of brain tissue appear like a model in the cube. He flicks a switch, and false colour marks some regions in red and orange. "The visual centres are destroyed," he says. "The nano particles store short-term information in a buffer for about ten seconds before loss of entanglement. It looks to me like we may have something coherent in the *superior temporal gyrus* region. Auditory processing. This may take some time to extract."

"How much time?"

"About an hour."

"Coffee?" she asks.

#### INT. CORFU — POLICE HQ — DAY

The Examining Magistrate is the tough sixty-year-old son of a Corfiot fisherman. He fought his way up against the power of the handful of wealthy families which have controlled large sections of the island for hundreds of years. Panyotis is not afraid of anybody – not even Lynne. He looks around the people in the conference room – Dimitris, Lynne, Danny, Jack, Sunil, Selina, and assorted detectives, sip water and await his words.

"This is a Greek matter. I accept that two British nationals have died, but that does not mean that a film company can become part of the investigation. Lieutenant Koukoulades – please explain."

Spiros is wishing he were anywhere else. "Magistrate," he says, "I agree with you, but these young women were unusually famous." He leafs through a stack of tabloids on the table with headlines like GOODNIGHT ANGEL and AMBER FALLS TO HER DEATH. "The film company has information that may be important to the investigation and for now at least I believe we should listen to what they have to say."

The magistrate rests his chin on his fist and looks at Lynne. "Make your case," he says.

Is the power of the Glasgow stare up to the power of the magistrate's dangerous dark eyes? She sucks in a breath and says, "Several of our key actors died within minutes of each



other. Two could be a coincidence, sir, but five or six? I think not." It's the first time she's used the word *sir* in thirty years. "I hope you will agree that there is *prima facie* evidence of a conspiracy. We are cooperating closely with the authorities in several countries to identify the source of this murderous attack. We have technology which may assist the investigation, and we have placed it at your disposal."

"I'm prepared to listen," the magistrate says, slowly, "but I doubt if any unproven technology will be permitted in court. Doctor Mariotos has also made it clear to me that your secret *technology* might have been a causative factor in the deaths of these people. She has professionally and properly given way as senior scientific officer to two senior forensic pathologists from Athens, who should be arriving at

the airport within the hour."

"Our system is highly confidential!" Lynne says forcefully.

"This may be a murder investigation. I will decide what is confidential. Doctor Mariotos – please proceed."

Selina stands at the end of the table and outlines the forensic analysis of the bodies of Amber and Angel. The results are consistent with a long fall and an overdose of sleeping pills. However, she will want to add to this after Sunil's evidence. She then formally seeks the Examining Magistrate's permission to allow Sunil Gupta to display the results of his tests. He nods.

Sunil inserts a disc into the Blu-ray player and coughs nervously. "I understand the magistrate's scepticism of unproven technology. What we have done today has never been done before. It's a side effect of the way we can interact with our actors' brains.

"We have a poor quality sound retrieval of the last ten seconds of Julia Simpson's life." He presses the remote. There's the sound of a petrol engine, then a bumping noise, a second louder metallic screech, a woman gasping, and a scream. The magistrate turns to Spiros and raises his eyebrows.

"Magistrate, we have found traces of impacted black car enamel paint on the left rear of the dune buggy consistent with an impact from behind."

The magistrate makes a *continue* gesture to Sunil. "We have a rather poor snapshot of the last few seconds of Angel Argent – Audrey Turner. To show this I will have to use our new immersive technology, which we call *InifiniDy*. Initially I will play it at fifty percent opacity – then, perhaps, at full intensity." Sunil gestures at the black box which sits on a table near the front of the room. The chairs, tables, and assembled people become translucent. They are all seemingly in the equally translucent kitchen of apartment 101 in Agios Stefanos. They feel overwhelming terror and sadness. A dark figure stands before them silhouetted by golden evening sun from the window, and they feel a cold spray in their nostrils. An American voice says "Goodnight Angel," and the superposed scenes cross-fade back to the police room. There's a long pause, then Sunil asks, "Shall

I play it at full intensity?"

"I think not," the magistrate says. "That seems to be adequately intense for me. Selina Maria?"

She's surprised at his use of her Christian name. He's obviously disturbed. "There are possible indications of methyl alcohol effects in the nasal tissue. I have sent samples by air to Athens for mass spectroscopy. Such things are very difficult to establish but it is possible that a propellant aerosol spray could have been used in this case."

The magistrate sits back in his chair. "Many years ago," he says, "when I was young I was in a scene in the James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only* made in the streets of Kerkyra, here. I was a good-looking – no, very good-looking – young man walking down a narrow passage as Roger Moore came by. We did it many times. Once, I looked into the camera, which I had been told never to do, and they shouted at me. The lighting was adjusted frequently, while we stood around. Hundreds of people were involved. I tell you this because as a young man I realised that when I see something in the cinema it is a carefully-crafted icon. What you have shown me may be true. But it may be a lie. Your trade is deceit. I rely on my police officers and doctors. The bodies will not be buried or repatriated until I say they may."

"Nor cremated?" Lynne asks.

"We do not burn bodies in Greece," says the magistrate. "We live in hope of the resurrection."

He stands. They all stand. He walks out. There's a pause and then a blinding flash. Alexandros comes through the door like a pantomime demon arriving on stage. He's very good looking, Alexandros. The day outside is ripped with a deafening tearing sound and then the deep echoing crack of thunder rattles the windows. The sky cuts instantly from blue to slate grey and huge raindrops waterfall down the glass. It doesn't drizzle much in the Ionian Islands – you're either in bright sunshine or underwater. Heralded by Zeus, the god of thunder, Alexandros walks across to Spiros and whispers in his ear. Lynne stares at him. He's actually having a physical effect on her.

Spiros says, "Please excuse me," and he and Alexandros leave the room.

"Latest?" Lynne asks Danny. He's had a tablet on his lap throughout the meeting. "We've got data from some bodies," he says. "We couldn't get any cooperation in Kiev. We've lost Tarquin to a very efficient Russian-built crematorium."

#### INT. CORFU – POLICE HQ OFFICE – DAY

Alexandros lays half a dozen photographs on Spiros' desk. "I've got all the pictures I could from the tourists on buses in Paleo that afternoon."

A lean ginger-haired man is crouching on the perimeter of the Golden Fox pool. He is raising a top-range Cannon EOS digital SLR camera towards his face. Amber Holiday stands by the pool, shaking water droplets off her perfect body. Flip pictures. Tourists are climbing off a bus, mugging into the camera and in the background there's a black 4x4. Amber is just visible through a taverna window climbing into the dune buggy and a lean man with a hint of red hair is walking through the car park.

"We've checked the number plate. Car hire firm at the harbour. He paid cash. Given the timing he was probably off the ferry from Brindisi. We're checking the CCTV in the harbour."

"Where's the car?"

"No trace."

Spiros picks up the picture of the man with the camera and walks out.

#### INT. CORFU – CORRIDOR POLICE HQ – DAY

Spiros fills a cup of water from the drinks machine in the corridor and hands it to Danny. He draws one for himself, and then reaches into his inside jacket pocket and takes out the picture of the photographer. "I didn't show you this," he says. "Any ideas?"

Danny examines the picture, hands it back to Spiros, and says, "Never seen him before. May I have a copy?" Spiros thinks about it and nods.

#### INT. CORFU TOWN TAVERNA – NIGHT

Selina has scrubbed up well and she leans across the table towards Sunil. She's not beautiful. She has a strong nose and dense black eyebrows, but they're framed with a burst of wavy dark brown hair. They've just demolished dolmades, small fish, green beans in tomato and garlic sauce, and a pile of charcoal-grilled lamb chops. "Where were you born?" she asks.

Sunil laughs. "Croydon," he says. "It's a suburb in south London. It wasn't Bombay. *Lipame*."

"Good try," she says. "It's a bit sad if your first Greek word is *sorry*. But let's get it right. It's not quite right the way you said it. It's *lee-PAH-may*! Go on!" When she repeats the middle syllable her lips open wide. The waiter brings another jug of wine and puts it on the table. Sunil practises the word after her. Several times.

"I have a little house," she says. "It's up in the hills towards Temploni. It's quite cool at night." She giggles. "I've got three goats and six chickens and I am *useless* at looking after them. My vegetables die. Every year I have big plans for my vegetables and by July they are dead. That's my life. At work I try very hard to keep people alive, and when I get home the sun has roasted the peppers to death. The goats despise me. Have you ever kept goats?"

Sunil admits that although there may be vast herds of goats in Croydon, he's never come across them.

"Goats are very intelligent," Selina says. "Sheep – you just eat. Goats – you know there's consciousness there. They're funny. They're adapted to survive. You should meet my goats."

Sunil puts his hand across the table. She puts hers over his. "I would very much like to meet your goats," he says. She nods, and calls "To logoriasmo, parakolo!" to the waiter. Sunil is making a neat pile of Euros on the table when Jack walks in.

Directors come in two flavours – charm or totalitarian dictator. Jack is charm. "Selina," he says, "you are looking stunning tonight. Sunil, the plane is leaving in two hours. Sorry to break up the party."

Sunil sees her eyes look down and her shoulders slump. "Sorry, Jack, not possible," he says. "We're running a parametric

vector equalisation test on the corpses. It won't be finished until around eleven o'clock tomorrow morning. If we interrupt it we'll scramble the data."

"Lynne's not going to be happy," Jack says.

"Send the plane back tomorrow. We'll have the equipment packed, at the airport and ready to go at fourteen hundred hours."

Jack thinks for a few seconds and nods. "Okay," he says, "it's your gig. But the flight costs come off your budget, not mine. Goodnight, Selina." He walks out.

The brown eyes lift and focus on Sunil's. "What exactly is a parametric vector equalisation test?" she asks.

"Haven't got the faintest idea," he says. "I think we'll have to ask the goats."



the air, catches it on the back of his hand and examines it. "Maybe," he says.

"Because if it doesn't," Lynne adds, "we're in deep shit."

FAST FORWARD two hours. The progress bars hit 100%. It gets quieter as the CPU fans in the portable units wind down to idle. Sunil stretches his back and says quietly to his team, "That's all the material we've got. Move it into the simulators very carefully, one actor at a time. Start with Amber – she's our worst case scenario."

What was flesh, what ate, what breathed, what read books and made love is now a collection of electron cloud superimpositions. Maybe it always was. Golden hair is numbers. Blue eyes are arrays of colour spectrum frequencies. Fear and affection are probabilities. The computers will now attempt to act the actors.

#### INT. PINEWOOD STUDIOS – DAY

Lynne and Danny are sitting in his office in the security centre looking at the pictures of a ginger-haired man holding a camera. "Spiros sent the pictures to Interpol," he says. "They're getting nowhere, but I have some *friends* who can dig a little deeper. His name is usually Adrian Kopp, but he has a dozen passports. He's a freelance. Ex CIA."

Danny swivels his chair around. "We've hacked everything we can hack. We still can't find out who's doing this to us. So far we haven't found this man, let alone the others."

"What others?"

"There have to be four or five at least. Times of death, Lynne. Nobody can get from Corfu to Kiev in an hour. This one's our only lead so far."

#### INT. UNIVERSA STUDIOS – LOS ANGELES – DAY

The man who sometimes calls himself Adrian Kopp is wearing cut-off jeans and a white T-shirt with a blue Texan university logo. He has his feet up on the chair in front of him. "That's a hundred percent hit rate," he says. "Worth the bonus, I think. I've put them back at least six months – maybe a year. They're going nowhere, and you'll be there first."

The balding man sitting behind his very big desk nods and smiles.

#### INT. PINEWOOD STUDIOS – DAY

Aluminium carry cases are stacked up the computing centre. The portable units are laid out on a bench and connected to a central bay with thick cables. Sunil stands behind his technical team. Jack stands behind him. Progress bars crawl across screens as petabytes of data move between the links.

Lynne walks in. "Is it going to work?" she asks.

Sunil takes a fifty pence piece from his pocket, flips it into

#### INT. PINEWOOD STUDIOS – STUDIO 3 – DAY

Jack is floating. Jack is the camera. Amber walks down the street with snowflakes blowing around her hair. Lynne sits beside Jack in the cradle. Neither of them is smiling. There is a faint, subtle *something* about Amber that doesn't quite flow. Sunil and his team are tweaking settings but generally making things worse.

They try a scene with the simulacra of each of their dead actors. Nothing works. They're looking at a brilliant display of technology and a cold and inadequate experience. This time the nymphs have really departed.

"So," Lynne says. "We've got three quarters of a movie we have no hope of finishing. Terrific! Got any ideas?"

"Only one," Jack says. "Get the writers in. I've put together the sequences that work. Maybe they can plot around them."

"What are we going to do for actors?"

"Get some new ones."

Lynne sighs. "It took five months to get the other brains functioning. We don't have five months. The money will walk. We have to do something...drastic."

#### INT. PINEWOOD STUDIOS – SECURITY – DAY

Danny indeed has *friends*. There isn't a film studio in the world that isn't laced with security cameras. In Vladivostok there's a team of high-powered ex-Soviet space industry computer experts with some very cute image-enhancement software, top-notch hacking skills, and a considerable fondness for dollars.

He's looking at video of a service area in an obscure corner of Universa Studios in Los Angeles. A white van with a ladder strapped to the top pulls up and a ginger-haired man steps out. A red circle appears around his face and the video slows to about one frame every two seconds. Inside the circle the fuzzy image clarifies. There's no doubt. Adrian Kopp carries a tool bag into the building, and the door shuts behind him.

Danny punches keys on his computer at the same time as he's initiating a connection on a quantum-encrypted handset. It's answered immediately. "The money is going into your account...now. I'll wait till you confirm. (TWO BEATS) Pleasure. How good is the firewall at Universa?"

"Top grade commercial," the voice at the other end of the line says, "but not up to military standards."

"Listen, Vladimir, I need to know exactly what they're doing, and I need to know what their weak spot is. I need this fast. This is a race. I'll double the money - now."

"Deal," the voice says. Danny retypes the entry on his computer and sends the money. After a pause the voice says, "Twenty-four hours," and the connection light goes off.

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INT. PINEWOOD STUDIOS - VIEWING THEATRE - NIGHT

Three writers are locked up with Jack, Rachel, two other directors, four line producers and a creative consultant. Things are not going well. Every pitch the writers make gets shot down by somebody. The creative consultant is obsessed with demographics. Each of the directors is having a severe fit of the *auteur* syndrome and worrying about hypothetical angles on hypothetical plot points.

Maddy Loveridge is a fifty-seven-year-old screenwriter and she's covered more paper with slug lines than an insecticide research station. Finally, she blows. "Why don't you all fuck off and let us get on with the fucking job!" she shouts. "We wrote you a great script and your fucking technology let you down! So don't blame us. We do *not* do this by fucking committee, alright? Do we come into your studio and tell you what to fucking do? No. We hand over. We go home and watch daytime TV while you do all the glamorous bits and eat the good dinners and get photographed with royalty. So bugger off and watch Fellini and wish you were that good."

Jack nods, and the directors and producers head for the door. The creative consultant stays where she is. She looks about fourteen years old. "Maybe I can help?" she asks.

Maddy smiles sweetly. "Yes, darling, you certainly can. You can go and organise some very nice curry and a case of red wine."

The door hisses shut after the creative consultant. There's a pause. "Was I over the top?" Maddy asks. "No," comes a reply, "I thought that was rather understated."

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INT. SUNIL'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Sunil's deeply asleep when his mobile rings. It's Selina. "I'm glad you're there," she says. "The bodies have gone. They broke into the mortuary and took the bodies. Why?" She sounds anxious.

Sunil talks to her quietly and calms her down. Then he asks, "Where are you?"

"Where do you think? I'm looking at empty body drawers."

"Is there anyone with you?"

"No. The police brought me in to confirm it. They've just gone."

"Selina," Sunil says, "listen to me. I want you to go to the busiest place you can find. Maybe A&E. I want you to phone Spiros."

I do not want you on your own. In fact, get me Spiros' phone number. Go now!"

"Why?"

"Because of what you know. They want to analyse the nano. They haven't finished. Go now! Go!"

There's a crash and the mobile phone link goes dead. He tries Selina's number: voicemail. He's out of bed and dressed in seconds, and he's calling Danny's mobile as he runs downstairs.

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INT. PINEWOOD STUDIOS - SECURITY - NIGHT

Danny lives half a mile from the studio complex and he's already there when Sunil runs in. "Easy, easy," he says. "Panic gets nobody anywhere. I've just been talking to Spiros. She's definitely not in the hospital. No one saw anything."

"Are they searching the area?"

"He's got three policemen. It's not exactly *Dragnet* on Corfu."

"If you were them what would you do? They've got two bodies and I'm praying they've got a live doctor. Where do they go?"

"Italy or Albania. Corfu to Brindisi is over a hundred miles. Albania is close enough for day trips."

"Which means a boat."

Danny sighs. "I don't think they're turning up at the airport and loading the bodies onto an easyJet flight, do you?"

"Come with me. I need you."

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INT./EXT. PINEWOOD STUDIOS - COMPUTER CENTRE - NIGHT

Two men in orange maintenance jackets climb down the access ladder on the high wall of the building, check their watches and drive off.

Sunil sits at a console in front of a bank of flatscreen monitors. Danny is across the room at the power control bay. Sunil says, "Power to level two." Danny selects a setting on the panel. From outside the faint hum of generators rises a tone.

"At some point, are you going to tell me what you're doing?" Danny asks.

"Level three, please. Look, there is always some entanglement with a tiny proportion of the nano. There's a lot of noise. Usually we filter it out. I'm locking all the computers together at maximum processing rate. I may be able to do something with the remaining nano. Just maybe. Level three, please." The generators are getting louder. Even if you'd been standing next to the shaped Semtex explosive charges on the helium lines above the roof and even if the timers had made any noise at all as they counted down to zero, you wouldn't have heard them.

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EXT. PINEWOOD STUDIOS - DAWN

Lynne always gets in very early. She turns off the ignition on her BMW and reaches for the seatbelt. The dawn light is coming up over the studios. She's fumbling for the seatbelt release when a bright flash is followed a second later by a huge bursting cloud of white vapour. The car rocks in the blast wave and rolls over. A shallow lake of liquid helium runs across the car park. It freezes the car roof into a brittle shell and evaporates.

INT. PINEWOOD STUDIOS —  
DAWN

CAMERA follows Danny and Sunil as they run from the computers to the door, through it into the corridor, slamming it shut behind them in a gust of helium vapour, and down the long walkway past the studio capsules towards Security, where the first thing they see is CCTV angles on the wrecked roof of their studio and Lynne hanging upside down in a frozen BMW.

FAST FORWARD ten minutes. Lynne is wrapped in a fire-blanket and sitting in the corner of Danny's office drinking strong black coffee. Sunil is on the phone talking to Spiros.

"Spiros, do you have access to the NATO surveillance system near Avliotes?"

"No. Impossible."

"It's an emergency. Can you talk to the military?"

"How many months do we have?"

"I'll call you back."

The red light starts to flash on Danny's encrypted telephone. Danny answers and listens. "Excellent. We'll speak later about that. We need another favour... Yes, paid favour... I'll put my technical chief on to you — and by the way Vladimir, he does not negotiate money... Fine."

Sunil takes the phone. Danny puts the conversation on speakers. "This is Sunil. We have an urgent need." Danny winces — never tell the seller it's urgent. "On the north of Corfu — Kerkyra — there's a NATO tracking station near Avliotes. We need wide m-band radar tracking at precisely 107.43 GHz. The painted image will be two or three small reflections phasing in and out at fifteen second intervals. The target will be on a boat heading north up the Albanian coast. We will need real time coordinates."

There's a pause and a deep voice says, "Put Daniel back on line."

Danny flips the speakers off and says, "Vladimir, can you do it? ... How many million was that? ... Hold on." Danny walks over to Lynne. She's stopped shivering. "I need a small budget increase," he says and holds up the fingers and thumbs of both hands.

"Get me another cup of coffee and you can have as much as you need," she says.

## INT./EXT. CORFU SEA — DAY

A small fishing trawler silently rides the swell in the bay of Liapades just south of Paleokastritsa on the west coast of the island. The sun is still below the hilltops to the east and the sea is shades of *kyanos* — dark blues and greens.

Two black body bags are on ice in the hold. Near them Selina is propped up against the hull. Her hands are tied behind her back and she's gagged with white surgical gauze. The hull wall



behind her vibrates heavily as the engines start up. A slim dark-haired man climbs down the stairs. He comes across to her, unties the gag and feeds her water from a bottle. "What do you want?" she asks in Greek. He shrugs. She asks again in Albanian. He laughs and rubs his fingers and thumb together to suggest money.

The boat begins to move out to sea and turns to the north.

INT./EXT. GREECE CORFU —  
RADAR STATION — DAY

Theologos is twenty-two years old and nearing the end of his national military service. He'll be relieved in two hours. Since the end of the Cold War it's about as boring as it gets monitoring absolutely nothing of interest in the radar sweeps.

Most of it is out of his control anyway. There's so little need for him to do anything that one of his predecessors spent a few months in military prison for getting his mother to cover for him while he went to a party in nearby Sidari.

He's thinking about breakfast when there are six loud alert sounds. A message in French and English appears on his main comms screen: *Baltic terrorist alert level orange. HQ Brussels assuming control. Ensure backup systems on-line and secured.*

The radar control settings screen shows the scanners switching to m-band frequency 107.43 GHz.

## INT. PINEWOOD — SECURITY — DAY

The radar sweep images from Peroulades appear on one of the big screens. Danny points to the chair in front of it. Sunil sits down. "Your turn, fella," he says.

Lynne is feeling better and pacing the room, angry. "They're calling all the shots here," she says bitterly. "We're running after them. I don't like being screwed around by these bastards!"

Danny leads her to the far end of the room and speaks very quietly. "This is the full picture," he says. "Universa are way behind on production of their EMO set-top boxes. The first batch they had from a plant in China was rubbish, and there were design faults anyway. They are shitting themselves that we'll get our stuff out first. But here's the thing: they've switched production to Korea. They're tooling up for a production run of seventeen million units. Single source. They're depending on a custom chip-set. We may be able to help them. But you don't need to know."

Ice-cold blue eyes stare into his. "Do it," she says. "And if you can kill a few of them while you're at it I sure don't need to know but I want to see the newspaper clippings."

Sunil jumps up and shouts, "Got them!" On the monitor the radar is painting a bright dot that fades on several sweeps and then flares again. There's a smaller, fainter dot next to it. The track is moving slowly up the west coast of Corfu.

Danny flips his mobile open and speed-dials Spiros.

## INT./EXT. GREECE CORFU — SEA — DAY

It's a beautiful morning. The sunlight dances on the tiny white-caps of the waves. The sea is ultramarine and the wake of the fishing boat is pure gleaming white foam flashing with rainbows. A dolphin flips out of the water for a moment and vanishes. Two coastguard single-prop planes come over the hills to the east and zoom loudly overhead. They bank steeply and turn back over the boat at five hundred feet.

The boat's captain goes to full throttle and keys his radio. He talks rapidly in Albanian, and then shouts. He takes a handgun from the hatch and sticks it under the belt of his shorts as he runs for the stairs down to the lower area.

Selina says nothing as he hoists a body bag over his shoulder and goes up again. She can't hear the splash over the engine noise. He returns and takes the second body bag. Then he comes back down again.

He holds the gun at her head as he cuts the rope tying her to a stanchion on the hull. "Up!" he says in Greek. Selina tries to stand on cramped legs and winces with the pain. "Hurry!" he shouts, waving to the stairs with the gun. She moves slowly. He hits her across the face and her nose starts to bleed. He pushes her up the stairs and onto the deck. He gestures towards the side of the boat. She moves across the planks until her thighs are against the rail. As he lifts the gun, there's an explosion of noise as a helicopter roars at low-level over the hills towards the boat. He looks up. When he looks down again, she's gone.

Maybe every human has a moment of *katharsis* – purification, release. Selina is feeling this now. The engines stop. She is under the boat, kicking slowly with her legs to conserve oxygen, when the dolphin comes up to her and nuzzles her gently. Maybe Poseidon has sent Delphinos to bring her the good luck she badly needs.

On the deck the captain raises his handgun towards the helicopter and is instantly shredded with machine gun fire.

## INT. PINWOOD STUDIOS — DAY

The technical centre is a wreck. The studio capsules are dead without their source. The computers are inert. There's water everywhere from the Fire and Rescue damp-down. This is a billion pound insurance claim.

Lynne stands there with Sunil and Jack. "How long to be up and running again?" she asks. "It took two years last time," Sunil says, "so let's be optimistic and say one."

They've never seen her cry before.

"We can finish the movie," Sunil says quietly. Lynne laughs through her tears and Jack puts his hand to his head. "And just how are we going to do that?" Lynne asks.

"Go out and shoot with real actors," Sunil answers.

"What?" She waves her arms around. "Which particular century are you in? We can borrow brains and do anything we like. We can shoot movies in three weeks that would have taken six months. You designed this stuff, for Christ's sake! Are you really suggesting that we go back to pointing cameras at *real people*? You're mad, isn't he Jack?"

Jack walks over to a pile of cable and stirs it with the toe of his Adidas trainers. "I'd like to do it, but we don't have anybody

left in the country capable of manning an old-fashioned unit. Cameras, lighting – it's all gone."

"Here, maybe," Sunil says, "but not everywhere. By the way, can I borrow the jet?"

"Why?"

"I've got an appointment with a doctor."

## INT. KOREA — ELECTRONICS FACTORY — DAY

Bright green motherboards move down the production line. The main processing chips have arrived from the fab unit. The chips have been made without human intervention, their millions of transistors carefully crafted from design templates on the central computer. The motherboards pause and chips are inserted by robotic units. They move on and pass through a bath of liquid solder. They arrive at the point where cables are attached and then into a bay where they are married with their shiny black set top boxes. From here the units reach the packaging area and slide neatly into the colourful cardboard boxes with pictures of fantastic movie scenes and the word EMO coming out like a stereoscopic projection. The slogan the world's been seeing day after day in an expensive advertising campaign runs across the boxes in a diagonal stripe: *See it, Feel it, Be it!*

The production lines move swiftly and efficiently, as they must, because they have seventeen million EMOs to produce, and that's just the start.

## EXT. CORFU — AGIOS STEFANOS NW — NIGHT

The little road through the village centre is blocked for traffic. Two nine-thousand watt lighting brutes are standing in the road outside The Little Prince. Thick cables run from the lights to a generator parked outside the bakery. The camera is on a jib arm and looks down on the taverna terrace from ten feet above. Jack stands next to the jib talking quietly to Elena Vafiadou, the camera operator.

Alexandros is wearing black trousers and a white shirt. Makeup assistants are gently tapping powder onto his face. He's a waiter who falls in love with an English girl and discovers that he has the power to manipulate people. He's going to have to make some big choices between using his powers for good or evil. Nearby, Alice Walton sits alone at one of the tables whilst a young woman from Frocks adjusts the straps on her dress.

At another table sit Spiros and Maria. Spiros wrinkles his nose and says, "I hate this makeup."

She smiles in a feline way and says, "See what I've had to put up with all these years for your pleasure, Spiros!"

He sighs. "I'm still not sure Alexandros is doing the right thing."

"I am," she says. "If you were younger and better looking I'd have put you up for the job!"

The Assistant Director picks up a megaphone. "We're going for a take. Starting positions, please. Is the kitchen ready?" There's a quick burst of affirmative radio traffic from the AFM in the kitchen. The Sparks hits the big switch and the lights come on, brighter even than a Corfu noon. "Quiet, please, and stand by!"

Jack says, "Turn over." Camera and sound operators confirm that they're rolling. "And – action!"

The music begins and Alexandros puts down his tray and begins to dance, his arms held out wide, his feet swinging back and forward and across and check and back again. He's light on his toes. He spins and kneels.

Michalis comes from the kitchen wreathed in steam as he carries Sizzling Steak across the terrace and puts it down on Spiros and Maria's table. Alice lifts her beautiful sad downcast eyes and watches Alexandros dance. This is the moment. This is the precise second when she falls hopelessly in love.

"And – cut! Check the tape," Jack calls. "Please reset and stay where you are – we're moving on to the close-ups."

Spiros leans back and says, "I never though it would be this boring. Same thing over and over again."

Maria laughs. "Like chasing Albanian and Italian boat thieves? I have never had such a wonderful time!"

He reaches forward and puts his finger on her hand. "You are my real star," he says. "You look beautiful. I don't deserve you. *Se latrevo*." Her eyes widen. It's a very long time since Spiros told her he adored her.

#### INT. CORFU – SELINA'S HOUSE – EVENING

Sunil is teaching Selina how to make lamb Madras with saffron rice and an aubergine baji. She's not gifted in the kitchen department. "The onions will burn if you leave the heat that high," he says.

She shouts, "Malaka!" and pushes him out of the way as she goes through to the living room and flounces herself down in front of the television, which is showing a Greek news channel.

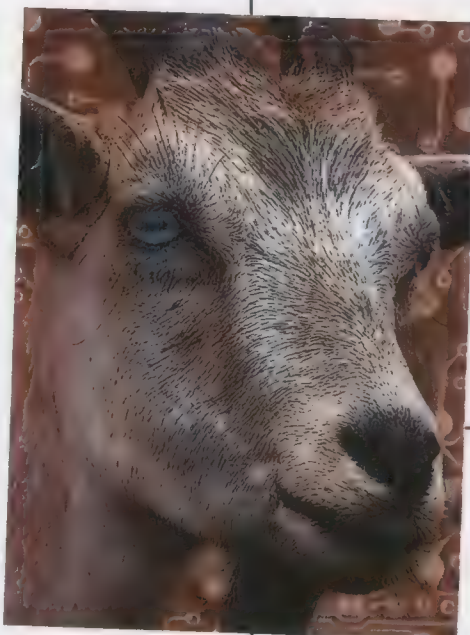
He smiles and rescues the curry.

She shouts, "Sunil! Sunil! Come! Now!"

He wipes his hands and walks through. He can't understand the fast Greek the news presenter speaks, but he can see the words *Universa* and *EMO* on the screen, together with shots of fire trucks.

Selina interprets. "He's saying that EMO boxes are catching fire or exploding. Several people have died. Hold on – this is several thousand incidents! Universa Studios have just issued a statement saying that they are recalling all EMOs. Wow! A media spokeswoman says it's a major disaster for Universa."

He goes back to the kitchen and adds the spices to the onions. Then he starts laughing and gets a bottle of *Ino bubbly* Greek champagne from the fridge. He's still laughing as he walks into the sitting room, peeling the foil, and lets the bottle go very loudly *pop* behind her back. She jumps and shouts, "Don't do that!" and turns to see him pouring sparkling wine over his head. He grabs her hand and pulls her towards him and bathes



both of them in a shower of bubbles. "What about the curry?" she asks, licking the wine off his face. "I turned the cooker off," Sunil says. "For now."

#### EXT. MALIBU CALIFORNIA – DAY

A body floats gently in towards the shore. It's bloated, and prawns have been nibbling the ears, eyes, and nose. But nothing has touched the ginger hair that floats back and forth in the shallow surf.

#### EXT. NOVOSIBIRSK SIBERIA – DAY

Danny is wrapped up in a big warm coat as he sits in a park in Russia's science city. There's no snow, but the cold grass looks as though it's been doused in grey paint.

A tall man in his early thirties – dark eyebrows, aquiline nose, parka hood up – comes and sits down beside Danny. "Only one target left," he says. "She lives in Kiev with her second husband and his two children. He doesn't know she was KGB."

"So now she's FSB?"

"Danny, Danny! I'm a programmer. FSB stands for Front Side Bus. I'm predicting some nasty short-circuits in the electricity supply to their apartment."

Danny stands up. "Don't hurt the kids," he says.

Vladimir laughs. "You work for movie business. Now you start having conscience! Very funny."

Danny walks away across the park. He turns back for a moment, waves and shouts, "Good job! *Spasiba!*"

#### MONTAGE – NEWSPAPERS AND VIDEO

Alexandros and Alice are on the front covers of every tabloid, every celeb magazine, and a thousand websites. His almost black eyes and her green eyes stare into paparazzi lenses. They are parading along carpeted catwalks. They are signing autographs. They are on chat-shows all over the world. The movie has received five Oscar nominations and seven BAFTA nominations.

Lynne Songbird has a whole page spread in *The Scotsman*. "The thing is," she's quoted as saying, "we've done the most advanced technology there is. We have done things so advanced it's like science fiction. But then we talked to the ordinary good people who watch our movies, and they said 'We don't care about 3D. We don't care about being forced to feel things we don't feel. We don't care about super-surround and giga-pixels, whatever they are. What we want is great stories, great acting, and maybe a little love besides.'"

#### INT./EXT. CORFU – SELINA'S HOUSE – NIGHT

Their bags are still unpacked by the door. They've just flown in from Los Angeles via Athens and they're tired. She looked

great at the Oscar ceremony, but she's not feeling great now.

The air is cool and sweet as they stand outside, fragrant with jasmine and thyme. The moon is up over the hills. Selina, whose name is *moon*, looks up and yawns. Sunil takes her hand and says, "I quit today."

"I know," she says. "Lynne told me. So what are you going to do?"

"We're not short of money. You're a great doctor. I'd maybe like to do another PhD. I'm a bit worried about your family. If I were just a Brit it wouldn't matter, but I'm second generation Indian and maybe they're a bit...concerned."

She hugs him, and says, "Hey, xenophobia is a Greek word. We've survived the alien invasions by the Italians, the Turks, and the Crusaders. I think even my mother can cope with you."

She kisses him on the cheek and goes in to bed.

Sunil walks down the garden in the moonlight. Magnolia bushes gleam a silvery pink and the olive trees dance a shadowy *sirtaki* in the breeze. He opens the gate to the fenced area where the goats live. They've heard him coming, and they're up and stirring. They come bounding up to him and jump around in delight that he's here.

"Tell you what, guys," he says to the goats. "You three are never going on the barbecue. That's a promise."

He lies on his back on the still-warm ground and looks up at the moon and the great bright splash of stars as the goats skip

gleefully over him and the night scent full of herbs and richness fills his nostrils and suddenly he feels immensely, ecstatically and overwhelmingly human.

CAMERA rises higher and higher over the Corfu hills, looking down at Sunil and the goats, and then the credits start to roll as Greek music swells on the sound track and the house lights brighten in the cinema:

Screenplay

JIM HAWKINS

Script Consultants

GILLIE EDWARDS, RAY CLULEY

Research

LESLEY ANN HOY

Producer

CATHERINE TOWNSEND

Director

DEAN CONRAD

With grateful thanks to The Little Prince, Agios Stefanos NW, Corfu, for the location, the moussakas, and the cold beer

THE END

"a refreshingly broad range of style and tones... passionately prophetic and entrancingly enigmatic... its idiosyncratic tales of terror tap into the fears, anxieties and uncertainties of the current zeitgeist." - *Interzone*

"a gritty verisimilitude... touching on the nature of evil... with some pointed satire as a bonus... a convincing feel to the science and an engaging sense of amorality to the character of the narrator" - *Black Static*



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# BOOK ZONE

## REAMDE

Neal Stephenson

review by Paul Graham Raven

## THE SILVER WIND

Nina Allan

review by Paul Kibbitt

## ROIL: BOOK ONE OF THE NIGHTBOUND LANE

Trent Jamieson

review by Maurice Kincaid Speller

## WITHER: BOOK ONE OF THE CHEMICAL GARDEN

Lauren DeStefano

review by Jack Delighten

## DEAD WATER

Simon Ings

review by Paul F. Cockburn

## NAKED CITY: TALES OF URBAN FANTASY

edited by Ellen Datlow

review by Lawrence Oshroff

## ECHO CITY

Tim Lebbon

review by Ian Hunter

## JOHANNES CABAL: THE FEAR INSTITUTE

Jonathan L. Howard

review by Sandy Auden

## FINAL DAYS

Gary Gibson

review by Peter Loftus

## DEBRIS

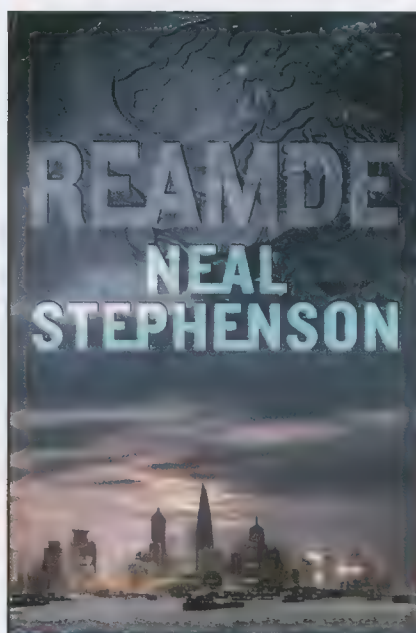
Jo Anderton

review by Ian Sales

## THE SILENT LAND

Graham Joyce

review by Peter Tennant



## REAMDE

Neal Stephenson

Atlantic, 1044pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven

I admire die-hard Neal Stephenson fans who splash out for the hardback; reading this paperback ARC of *Reamde* without using a lectern is an invitation for carpal tunnel syndrome. That's par for the course with Stephenson, of course, and *Reamde* shares other hallmarks of his work: set-pieces of epic scale; complex international intrigues; obsessive digressions into the minutia of subjects such as firearms handling procedures, the irrational logics of fiat currency, the equipping of hijacked fishing boats for unexpected jaunts in international waters, and the best way to fly an illegally chartered private jet non-stop from Xiamen, China into North American airspace without being detected. Oh, and virtual worlds, of course, in the form of the online fantasy RPG "T'Rain", whence emerges the titular computer virus.

What is completely absent from *Reamde*, however, is a speculative novum. It's undoubtedly a text that partakes in science fiction as a mode of looking at the world (and the relationships between things in that world), but *Reamde* is written as a contemporary technothriller, even though it fails Bruce Sterling's litmus for that genre: the President of the USA does not appear as even a minor character.

As a devoted reader of Stephenson, the chewy delights of his prose alone –

retaining the ornate hyperfocus of *Anathem* and the *Baroque Trilogy*, even while it eschews the invented and anachronistic languages that haunt them respectively – was a source of great enjoyment, but here's a lesson about harbouring expectations: the science fictional attitude of *Reamde* had me watching from the corner of my eye for the moment when something classically Stephensonian would sneak in and crank up the WTF factor a few notches; a non-existent island micronation with a crazy name, maybe, or a mysterious guy called Enoch, or some technological advance that deftly switches the author's map for the reader's territory, rendering the familiar momentarily – maybe even permanently – strange. But it's not there. Unless I missed it, *Reamde* is pure of science fiction's speculative urges. It is, perhaps, a realist technothriller... or at least the equivalent of a realist technothriller for a world wherein we're increasingly unsure what's real.

To describe *Reamde* as a technothriller is not to belittle it. If anything, it is to belittle that genre; if the size and prose density of *Reamde* doesn't put off the post-Clancy market, Stephenson's refusal to establish a strict black-and-white moral axis or to fetishise the nation-state as anything other than a hollow anachronism may see them bounce off pretty hard. Even so, I imagine that anyone who makes it through the first hundred pages – the time it takes Stephenson to set up his game board and get the pieces moving – will find themselves wanting to finish it.

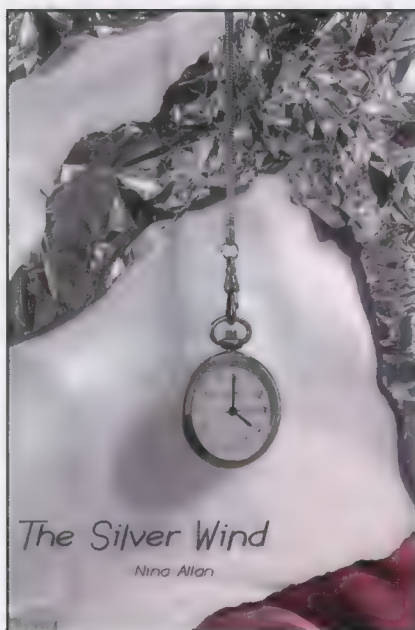
As I'm making sweeping homogenising statements about the technothriller readership, I might as well ponder whether they'd be as bothered by Stephenson's characters, who – despite being drawn in amazing detail and complexity – never quite escape the Central Casting archetypes that one imagines they were conceived as. That his viewpoint characters are always geeks of a sort is understandable, but nationality has always been Stephenson's shortcut and it's inescapable here, as characters repeatedly describe themselves and others with sweeping generalisations stated as fact: stubborn ruthless Russians, stoic mathematically-minded Hungarians, genial but bribe-happy Chinese peasantry, the list goes on.

Stephenson does this consistently throughout *Reamde*, not to mention his back catalogue. Perhaps it's meant as a satirical statement about nationality in the (post)modern world? After all, none of us are immune to the temptations of

stereotyping, a troublesome remnant of our tribal primate past, and nationality – despite the institutions on which it is based rusting away from within, or perhaps because of it – is an important tool in our attempts to comprehend the complexities of a system as big as the whole planet.

But I struggled not to be niggled by it here. My colleague Deb Chachra expressed this as well as it can be expressed: Stephenson can write one character brilliantly, namely the plucky, determined and super-smart oddball geek who rises to the occasion when the chips are down. There are male and female versions here in *Reamde*, and at an attitudinal level they're all but indistinguishable; they're vividly drawn, fully possessed of fictive life on the page, but it's as if brilliant actors have run up against a director who refuses to let them transcend his original pen-portraits. And once we get beyond our viewpoint characters and into the supporting cast, it's all regional and/or professional stereotypes, the sort of characters credited at the end of cheap action movies as "Psychotic Russian Mob Boss", "Usefully Corrupt Chinese Receptionist #2" or "Second Jihadist From The Left". In a symbolic post-cyberpunk novel like *Snow Crash*, where nationality is a target of satire and deconstruction, one can make a case for this sort of characterisation as intrinsic to the metaphor; in a mimetic thriller, however, that case is very weak. To be clear, there's no whitewashing or nastiness at work: just a frustrating flatness of affect that's difficult to reconcile with the great skills Stephenson brings to bear in other areas.

Perhaps I feel the need to pick holes (or fights) because of *Reamde*'s ambition, and its genuine achievement. Even if you don't get on with it, you'd be hard pressed to maintain the traditional critique of Stephenson as an author who hides behind linguistic flim-flam; his command of the text of *Reamde* – from sentence level on upwards – is complete, and the two vast set-pieces at either end of the book are sustained demonstrations of skill and verbosity that make the Deliverator's opening soliloquy from *Snow Crash* look like an early warm-up at a hipster poetry slam. And while it never makes the leap into truly science fictional territory, the lingering threat of such a transition haunts the high-continual action of the whole novel. As one character remarks of the story, well past the halfway point, you may well find yourself wondering "when [will] the pirates and dinosaurs turn up?"



## THE SILVER WIND

Nina Allan

Eibonvale, 154pp, £18.00 hb

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

When does a collection of linked stories turn into a novel? It must entail that moment when the congeries of stories tells us more than any individual story can do. That is certainly the case with this slim volume from Nina Allan.

The book consists of four stories and an afterword (which amounts to a fifth story). Individually, there is one overtly science fictional story, and three others that are, to all intents and purposes, mainstream except for a subtle temporal quirk that perhaps shifts them towards the fantastic. But collectively, taking account of the interconnections and resonances that run between them, it is impossible to read this book as other than science fiction. That delicacy of tone, that subtlety of intent, is what makes this such an arresting volume.

In all but one story (where the viewpoint character is unnamed), our way into each fiction is called Martin. In one story he has a sister named Dora, who dies; in another, he has a brother named Stephen, who dies; in a third, he has a colleague named Dora. Names recur, but that is an old trick in fiction; it can suggest more than is actually in the story, can make us read a recurrence of character and not just of name. But here, reading across the stories, we begin to realise that it is the same character, and the dislocation from one story to the next is

what we are being directed towards.

The most obvious link between the stories is the "Circus Man", with that faint air of menace and unease that is part of the affect of all clowns. This one is a dwarf that appears, usually at a distance, on the seafront at Hastings. To Martin, the dwarf is a harbinger of threat that can never quite be put into words and that, in the event, never materialises. But the clown is also an expert watchmaker whose fine and extraordinary timepieces provide a connecting thread through the volume. Watches control time, yet for everyone time is out of control, time is running out, time is what must be seized if we are to take control of life.

Time is an old standby in science fiction, of course, but what is interesting about Allan's use of the theme is that it is not time as a dimension that is being explored, but the more common or garden mystery that we all experience every day, what we measure when we look at our wristwatches and yet what cannot be measured.

Only one of the stories, 'The Silver Wind', uses time in an overtly science fictional manner. It is an alternate history, in this case Martin is a salesman in a run-down, dystopian England, its characteristics sketched in briefly but effectively. In this world Circus Man is Andrew Owens, who makes devices that really can control time, and by chance Martin finds himself transposed into an England that more closely resembles our own. In this new world he goes regularly to Paddington Station where, he is confident, he will one day run into Andrew Owens again. This is significant, because in the next story, 'Rewind', Martin is an estate agent in a contemporary England who takes his new girlfriend to Hastings looking into memories of his childhood there (a childhood that recalls aspects of the first two stories without precisely matching them). Here he encounters Owens, 'this little circus freak who had somehow learned to stop the clock, or turn it back' (134), and Owens mentions their meeting at Paddington, which Martin no longer recalls. It is this reference, late in the last story, that somehow turns a collection of linked stories into a novel: that makes the dissonances and dislocations between the various versions of Martin's life so telling.

These are good stories, but their sum is far greater than their individual parts.

[www.eibonvalepress.co.uk](http://www.eibonvalepress.co.uk)

**ROIL (THE NIGHTBOUND LAND 1)****Trent Jamieson**

Angry Robot, 384pp, price? pb

**Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller**

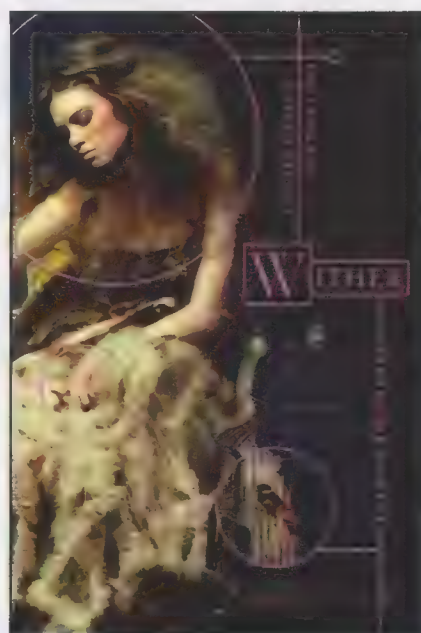
Trent Jamieson draws his inspiration for this novel in part from the fantastic fiction of the early twentieth century. He invokes Hope Mirrlees in his portrayal of small-town life, and most explicitly in the town of Mirrlees-on-Weep, but he draws his plot, and indeed the trilogy's title, from William Hope Hodgson's *The Night Land*. The inhabitants of Shale are similarly threatened by a planet-wide cloud of heat and vapour which corrupts everything with which it comes into contact, and in which strange creatures lurk. Hope Hodgson's characters have long since retreated to the Great Redoubt, a metal pyramid so vast it holds more than a thousand different cities, but on Shale, the survivors struggle on, concentrated into fortified towns, most of which have now been lost to the Roil while the others are threatened by a sudden acceleration of the cloud's progress.

In *The Night Land* the occupants of the Great Redoubt have become detached from their past. The inhabitants of Shale, by contrast, are still in the process of losing their history and with it the knowledge that might save them from the Roil. Several characters believe the explanation for the Roil's presence lies unrecognised in the history books, and this is made explicit, perhaps excessively so, by the way each chapter of the novel begins

with quotations from different accounts of Shale's past. Using this evidence, the smart reader naturally suspects that Shale's inhabitants may themselves be responsible for the Roil's creation but this prospect is so terrible they can barely acknowledge it. The Engineers deal in what seem like abstractions to the majority but the Confluents are concerned with day-to-day survival and are critical of the Engineers' trust in big solutions although they know their own response to the threat is pathetically inadequate. Attitudes have hardened into political ideology over the centuries, leading to the creation of the Vergers, a security force to keep the two groups apart but one with its own inscrutable agenda.

In this atmosphere of fear and paranoia, the Engineers have staged a bloody takeover, leaving David Milde, son of a Confluent leader, on the run. A drug addict, he is an unlikely candidate to survive a journey through dangerous territory, and it is a mercy that he is quickly – too quickly – found by Cadell, a mysterious figure associated with the Confluent but also much older than them. At the same moment, Margaret Penn, daughter of two of the most able scientists on the planet, is fleeing Tait, which had survived in the Roil until its defences were sabotaged. It is inevitable that the paths of the two young people will cross, the only question being, to what purpose?

Jamieson has worked hard to establish the novel's atmosphere, echoing Bradbury and Swanwick alongside the earlier writers. But, as trapped in his own literary history as his characters are in their past, Jamieson seems to have abandoned story. David and Margaret forever teeter on the brink of making significant discoveries without ever quite getting there, as aimless in their thoughts as they are in their wanderings. One longs for them to grasp at least some of the dark hints that Cadell offers them but they seem remarkably slow to understand. I'd like to believe this is Jamieson's deliberate choice, an attempt to hold the reader's attention that has misfired, but too often it seems as if he's not sure which way to go, or else he is too in love with his setting to move beyond it. As a result this novel is stiff with unfulfilled potential as its characters dawdle along, impotent in the face of the Roil's threat. I only wish I were eager for the next volume because of the strength of the storytelling rather than to see how Jamieson writes his way out of the technical impasse he's created.

**WITHER (CHEMICAL GARDEN 1)****Lauren DeStefano**

Harper Voyager, 358pp, £9.99 pb

**Reviewed by Jack Deighton**

A genetically based cure for cancer has left a First Generation almost immortal barring accidents. However their children and grandchildren are not so lucky as a side effect – referred to as “the virus” – kills off males at 25 and females at 20. The societal consequences include a large cohort of children of these unfortunates being brought up in orphanages or left to fend for themselves. Efforts are being made to find a cure but these are opposed – sometimes violently – by groups who think there has been too much meddling already. “Gatherers” sweep the streets for young vulnerable females to provide subjects for research or suitable wives for wealthy young aristocrats. In addition a Third World War has “demolished” all of the world, except for North America (of course). The rest is ocean dotted with a few islands.

At the novel's start Rhine Ellery has been kidnapped and is being transported in a darkened van with other captives. At journey's end the girls are subjected to a selection process. Rhine's differently coloured eyes attract the selector and, as she is whisked off in a limousine, with two others, a naïve young Cecily and a more streetwise Jenna, she hears gunshots from the van. The three girls' fate is to become prisoners in a vast establishment in Florida run by the First Generation researcher

into the virus Housemaster Vaughn and to be "sister wives" of Vaughn's son, House Governor Linden, whose present wife is 20 and dying.

Rhine is resolved not to succumb to this (albeit pampered) existence. She strikes up a relationship with a young servant, Gabriel, and despite being officially married, allows Linden no sexual favours. Cecily, happily, and Jenna, less so, provide his distractions in that regard.

There are irresistible echoes in this scenario of *The Handmaid's Tale* but as in that novel the background leaves a lot to be desired and fails to convince.

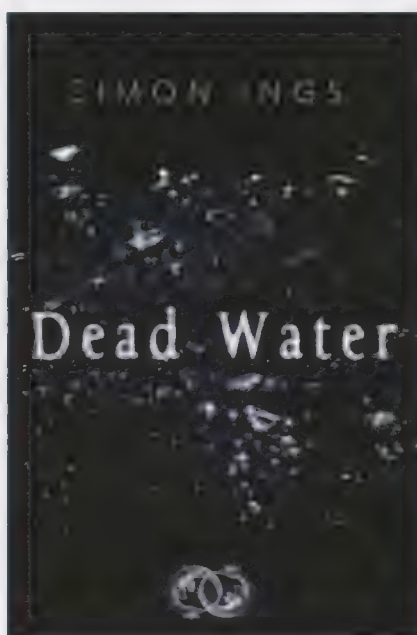
While orphaned adolescents live in perpetual fear and Gatherers leave discarded victims to rot at the roadside there are still business expos, televised first nights and New Year parties. People even go to the cinema. In most respects life outside captivity in the Big Houses is depicted pretty much as in our present day. How the Himalayas, for example, could be reduced to sea level yet Florida be above the waves is something of a puzzle and though hurricanes are to be expected Florida seems very wintry here. In addition the "virus" does not behave like a virus and a cure for cancer that's also effective against ageing is just too pat. Why the lives of girls rejected by Gatherers are worth so little remains unexplained. Surely it is more likely they would be treated as a resource not to be wasted?

All of this is unfortunate as at the level of the writing *Wither* is very good. Though she seems unaware that 'none' is singular DeStefano can otherwise turn a sentence and she relates the unfolding relationships between the sister wives deftly and that of Rhine and Gabriel delicately – though Housemaster Vaughn is a bit of a cardboard villain and House Governor Linden, despite his profession as a kind of architect, is too lacking in self regard. Scions of wealthy families are not usually noted for their reticence.

The resolution, when it comes, is a bit rushed and is achieved too easily but provides ample scope for continuing Rhine's story.

The nature of the Chemical Garden of DeStefano's planned trilogy is a mystery; unless there is a deep plot as yet unrevealed beneath the surface of the book. It would be good to think there is. On this evidence, though, that is unlikely.

Yet DeStefano shows promise. With a bit more rigour in her backgrounding she might be one to savour.



## DEAD WATER

Simon Ings

Corvus, 344pp, £16.99 hb

Reviewed by Paul F. Cockburn

It can be argued that many writers seek to express the universal by focusing on the particular, even if some so-called 'literary' fiction risks slipping into self-centred parochialism as a result. Yet, especially on the SF shelves, there are still some authors who look to the universal; who understand that focusing on the daily experiences of one man and his dog isn't necessarily sufficient when exploring the 21st century world in which we live.

Simon Ings is a science and thriller writer known for working on such broad canvases. With *Dead Water*, he crosses much of the world and the last one hundred years, in the process taking in not just our rapidly changing scientific understanding of the physical world but also the burgeoning globalisation of trade and culture made possible by the development of container shipping.

Wide canvas notwithstanding, Ings is still aware of the individual and, among a large cast of characters introduced throughout the novel, three in particular stand out: Roopa Vish, an Indian police officer so determined to bring down a member of one of the country's principle criminal families that she ends up sleeping with him and carrying his child; Eric Moyse, a shipping magnate who first thinks of container ships while caught out on

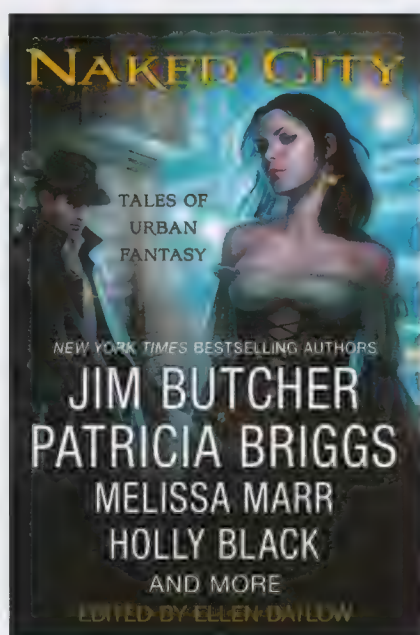
the streets during the London Blitz; and David Brooks, the ex-military intelligence officer turned double agent, involved in government-sponsored coups and piracy.

As is explained quite early on in the novel, "dead water" is a nautical term for the strange phenomenon which can occur when two layers of water (for example, fresh water resting on top of denser salt water, or two layers of different temperatures) fail to mix – if a ship's propeller is caught in the boundary, it only creates waves and turbulence between the two layers rather than driving the vessel onwards. It is a strange, real world concept that Ings successfully expands metaphorically during what could be taken as simply an informed adventure story set against global shipping systems and the piracy that it continues to inspire.

This is most obviously the case with his main characters, all of whom can be said to be stuck in the interfaces between different cultural 'densities' and are therefore buffeted, moulded and ultimately left powerless by the waves that form around them. They may think they're making their own choices, powering ahead through their lives, but Ings ensures that his readers know otherwise – and it's to his credit that we quickly care enough about Roopa, Moyes and Brooks to stick with them as they are pushed towards their inevitable ends.

Ings isn't the first writer to explore the clandestine potential of container shipping. Yet, while his suggestion – that the world's most dangerous materials, including biological weapons, haven't been lost or destroyed, but have been simply hidden away within the millions of containers being moved constantly from one continent to another – is grounded enough, he is not above utilising fantastical narrative tools to power the story. For example, early on, a pair of twins killed in one of India's biggest rail crashes become story-fixed djinns who flit through the novel's complex time line with little clear purpose other than to initially link the opening narrative strands and possibly underline the concept of "froth" created in dead water.

That is not to deny, however, that Ings is an intelligent, yet also emotive author; his writing is both deliberate and dynamic, on occasions dazzling in its intensity, such as when he describes the train crash in exquisite slow-motion or sums up the noise and frenzy of an impoverished Indian town in less than a single page of bold, energetic prose. All in all, this is a truly exciting and challenging read.



### NAKED CITY: TALES OF URBAN FANTASY

edited by Ellen Datlow

St Martin's Griffin, 539pp, \$15.99 tpb

#### Reviewed by Lawrence Osborn

Another month, another anthology of urban fantasy – or so it seems. Last issue I reviewed Peter Beagle and Joe Lansdale's recent volume, while George Martin and Gardner Dozois' new collection is due out next month.

In their take on the genre, Peter Beagle and Joe Lansdale set out to define urban fantasy and classify it into a number of sub-genres, which they illustrated by means of a number of carefully selected previously published stories. In her new anthology, Ellen Datlow has taken a very different tack: she commissioned a series of new stories from a range of authors with the brief that the city in which the story was set should be as important to the story as anything else.

Perhaps most striking is the sheer diversity of the twenty stories in this collection. That diversity is echoed in the title, *Naked City*, which recalls the documentary/crime photography of Weegee, a crime movie and a spin-off TV series, which had the catchphrase "There are eight million stories in the naked city, this has been one of them." Here we have detective stories, supernatural romance, vampires, soft science fiction, possibly steampunk, humour and outright horror. There is traditional fantasy and there are

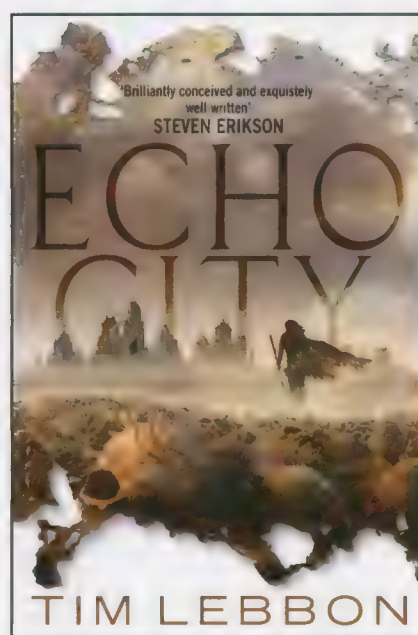
one or two offbeat stories that refuse to be categorised. There are historical settings and contemporary settings in cities that include London, Berlin, Haifa and, of course, New York, while other stories are set in cities entirely of the imagination.

Several are set in existing fictional universes. Of these I had previously read only Ellen Kushner's *Swordpoint* (the novel behind her contribution 'The Duke of Riverside'), so this volume has given me a welcome introduction to several new novels and in one or two cases new novelists, notably Jim Butcher's *Dresden Files* (on the strength of 'Curses', the opening story of the collection, because I'm a sucker for supernatural detective fiction) and Melissa Marr's *Graveminder* (because I enjoyed her transposition of noir to a contemporary Hades).

With contributions from the likes of Pat Cadigan, Lucius Shephard, Lavie Tidhar, John Crowley and Naomi Novik, there are many gems in this collection, but my personal favourite was, undoubtedly, 'Oblivion by Calvin Klein', a striking piece by Christopher Fowler. Set in the department stores of London, this story focuses on the city as the home of consumerism. For the protagonist of the story, shopping has become a drug and as a compensation for the lack of sexual satisfaction in her marriage. Beneath a veneer of biting wit, Fowler has hidden an uncompromising attack on consumerist values. But, for me, the real highlight of this story is his language, which simply makes it a joy to read.

Inevitably in a collection of such diversity, there were some stories I didn't enjoy. For example, Peter Beagle's 'Underbridge' is well written, but the protagonist is an unpleasant character who meets an unpleasant (and, once the story is set up, rather predictable) end. Another one that didn't work for me was Jeffrey Ford's 'Daddy Longlegs of the Evening', which read like straightforward horror rather than dark fantasy. For some reason, the urban setting did not seem particularly important in this story (unless, perhaps, the possessing spider is to be taken as some kind of metaphor for the dehumanising effect of the city).

Taken as a whole, *Naked City* is a fascinating snapshot of the state of urban fantasy in 2011. It should be essential reading whether you are an established fan of urban fantasy or someone who is wondering whether this kind of fiction is for you.



### ECHO CITY

Tim Lebbon

Orbit, 592pp, £7.99 pb

#### Reviewed by Ian Hunter

The Orbit cover of Tim Lebbon's new novel *Echo City* differs from the US Bantam Spectra edition and features a striking cover illustration by Lee Gibbons of a stranger – a wanderer – approaching a distant hazy city glimpsed through a cloud of sand and dust, but to get there he has to traverse a sea of splintered, cracked, rune-covered skulls. A killing ground where thousands have clearly died, but of what? In contrast, the US version of the book has – I think – a more science fictional cover, with a slightly subterranean feel to it, and a futuristic city of gleaming towers that is possibly inappropriate. Should you judge a book by its cover? Well, you are off to a good start if you have been enticed into buying a copy by Gibbons' artwork and an even better one with Lebbon's opening few pages that make up a prologue which gives a horrific, yet strangely touching account of multiple deaths and rebirths, all leading to... Well, that might be giving away a crucial part of the plot; let's just say there is a fitting circular feel linking the start and end of the novel. Not only that, but the engrossing beginning contains some of Lebbon's best writing in an unflinching narrative voice that is intriguing and instantly pulls the reader into the story.

For some of its inhabitants, *Echo City* is believed to be the last city in the world.

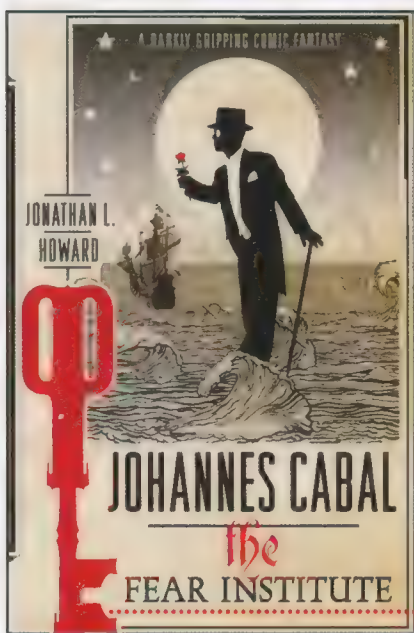


There is nothing beyond its walls except an empty, toxic desert. Yet, amazingly, sensationally, someone – not just a man with no name, but a man with no memory – has managed to cross the desert and reach the

city, and his coming is the stuff of legend, or prophecy and a justification to those in the oppressed minorities who lurk in the shadows, and practise their strange religions, or cults, away from those who would mercilessly persecute them. Yes, it should come as no surprise that those in power have their own reasons to fear this newcomer and what he might mean for the world of Echo City.

Everyone has an agenda, from those who rule the city, wanting to preserve the status quo, to those who would protect the stranger, now named Rufus, and fulfil their own ends through his presence, but Echo City is a vast, ancient, lethargic place. A myriad of decay, made up of past cities that have died and been built upon, time and time again. Within its depths are forbidden arts of genetic manipulation and something which believes its time has finally come as it starts the long, slow climb towards the light.

*Echo City* is a horrific, suspenseful read full of creepy invention, yet despite having sections which are crystal clear in their clarity and rank right up there with some of Lebbon's best descriptive writing, and some of the best writing around by anyone else in the horror and dark fantasy fields (as contrasted by a couple of sections which I thought needed a tighter edit), the reader appears at times to be given information about the city and its denizens almost in a need-to-know basis with tantalising snippets of information and reveals coming our way – or not. No major info-dumping here, which is frustrating as Lebbon has created a unique worldview and a plot that has the potential to be as multilayered as the city he has created and I wished we could have wandered around its dangerous depths a little bit longer. The events of *Echo City* may well spawn a sequel but the events and degree of invention in this original story could easily have been told over a book or three. Expect a worthwhile read and something different from Mr Lebbon; just don't expect all your questions to be answered.



## JOHANNES CABAL: THE FEAR INSTITUTE

Jonathan L. Howard

Headline, 352pp, £19.99 hb

Reviewed by Sandy Auden

Johannes Cabal heads off on his latest adventure to some very strange shores indeed. After visiting Hell in book one, and getting stuck in the claustrophobic confines of an airship in book two, Cabal is now approached by three members of The Fear Institute to be their guide in the Dreamlands – a place created by dreamers, where other realities touch and cross and allow access to powerful magic. The chance to access this magic for his own necromantic purposes proves too much for Cabal, and he agrees to help Messrs Shadrach, Corde and Bose journey through Dreamlands on a quest to capture the Phobic Animus – fear itself – and bring it back to the real world.

And so we embark on a journey of exotic quests across the fluid landscapes of the imagination, encountering fantastic beasts, torn skies and crazy hermits. We discover a number of fascinating creations – some involving intelligent rats, others involving impossible architecture – and you're often unsure about what's going to turn up next. It's all rather pleasantly unpredictable overall and there are a number of clever twists that are revealed along the way – always solved by Cabal himself with a generous measure of smugness that befits his self-serving personality.

And Cabal's personality certainly infuses

the story with his caustic observations, pragmatic viewpoint, disregard for anyone except himself and underlying, singular aim in life relating to his chosen field of necromancy. Cabal also brings with him his humour, an important feature of the book and indeed the series. Once more there are several laugh-out-loud moments and a few pauses for a good chuckle. In one such moment, the travelling companions decide to split up in the Dreamland city of Hlanith but they are all afraid of how they'll get on with the locals: "This was quashed by a heavy implication from Cabal that they were subject to the [dreaded] influence of the Phobic Animus and so were behaving like ... a 'big bunch of jessies.'" Other notable moments involve seven sided gates and frightening glove puppets so at least Howard doesn't take one joke and repeat it endlessly.

Cabal's humour and self-interest carries across all the volumes but there are times within *The Fear Institute* itself that he becomes a little inconsistent. He's generally devoid of any compassion for his fellow humans but in places he suddenly feels the urge to look after people or do noble things to save lives before returning to murder and torture without any sense of guilt. People are genuinely complex but here it just pops you out of the story with a puzzled look on your face. Other weak aspects also include the meandering conclusion and the book's inability to fully engage the reader. Maybe the characters weren't sympathetic enough or the strong masculine content left me out in the cold but the book was too easy to put down, even in the middle of the more exciting sequences.

But whatever the story does or doesn't do, there's no doubt that it is heavily influenced by H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos. The entire style of the prose is an homage to HPL although Cabal's is a first-hand account rather than the second-hand, reconstructed account found in the likes of 'The Call of Cthulhu'. Then there's the gods of HPL's stories who populate Cabal's Dreamlands and a tendency for people to go mad when gazing upon specific entities and constructs. Cabal also journeys across the Cthulhu landscape although even the author confesses to a bit of plate tectonics – moving the Eastern Continent and transplanting lakes and abandoned cities.

It's a respectful and masterful tip of the hat to HPL but it's still warped around the singularity that is Johannes Cabal – producing something Lovecraft-flavoured but uniquely belonging to author Jonathan L. Howard.

**FINAL DAYS**

Gary Gibson

Tor, 373pp, £17.99 hb

**Reviewed by Peter Loftus**

The year is 2235 and humanity has colonised the stars courtesy of a wormhole network that links the Earth with over a dozen different solar systems. Travel via wormhole is not without its risks, however. ASI agent Saul Dumont knows this better than anyone, since the collapse of the link to the Galileo system has left him stranded on Earth for more than a decade. Wanting nothing more than to get back to his wife and daughter on Galileo, Saul is within weeks of his goal when he happens across a conspiracy that will change the future of humanity.

The powers that be have discovered a second wormhole network created by the alien Founders that stretches billions of years into the future. The first expedition, to the mysterious Site 17, is enough to demonstrate that humanity is dealing with things far beyond its understanding. The news from the second expedition is even more unsettling. Travelling to an Earth ten years in the future, the team discovers a solar system devoid of life. Whatever catastrophe has befallen mankind, it has left only one survivor: Mitchell Stone, who disappeared on the Site 17 expedition, deep in cryo in the ruins of a lunar city. Mitchell awakes with powers and knowledge bestowed on him in the distant future and it falls to him and Saul to prevent the

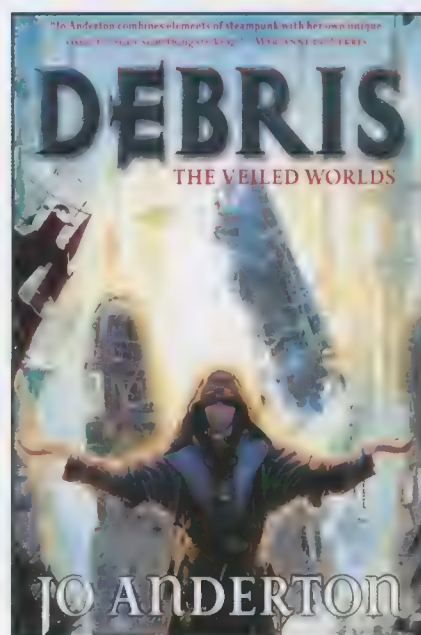
destruction of the Earth.

The action from this point follows the efforts of Mitchell, Saul and expedition member Jeff Cairns to evade the grasp of the ASI as they search for answers. Meanwhile, vast structures that resemble floral corollas large enough to be seen from orbit have begun to surface from the oceans and humanity must face the knowledge that the end is nigh.

*Final Days* initially appears to be quite a conservative effort. The world-building is tightly controlled and, although imaginative, does not really go anywhere we haven't seen before. However, the technology of Earth in 2235 and its relationship to the characters of *Final Days* has been extremely well thought out, so much so that it frequently adds to the tension and complexity of the plot – surely a prerequisite of 'good' science fiction. Although Gibson plays it reasonably safe as far as world creation goes, the depth and authority of the way he handles that creation contributes greatly to the overall effect and counts as one of the novel's greatest successes.

Another strong point is the author's economy with words. Gibson is very careful not to waste his readers' time. Scenes and characters are relayed with maximum efficiency. Exposition is masterfully handled too – threaded into action and dialogue rather than info-dumped in long passages. The only drawback of this approach is that readers might sometimes wish they could get further into the characters' heads. Although each has been set up with enough baggage and back-story to bring them to life and generate a broad range of fictional options, it is still possible to get to the end of the novel and wonder how real the characters actually felt and whether they could have drawn you into the story more. Instead, Gibson relies on keeping things moving along at a brisk pace to keep the reader engrossed. It's a formula that works for the most part with the exception of the last third of the novel when events fly past at such a rate that it all begins to feel a bit unreal. By that stage, the vagaries of the plot seems to become less important as the actions hastens towards a climax that struggles to eclipse all that has come before.

On the whole this is a satisfying and absorbing read from a hugely enjoyable author. While it might not feel as cutting edge as some contemporary releases, it more than makes up for this by doing the basics so well.

**DEBRIS**

Jo Anderton

Angry Robot, 416pp, £7.99 pb

**Reviewed by Ian Sales**

We readers like our marketing categories. Whether we call it a genre, a mode, or whatever, we like to know whether a piece of fiction is likely to fulfil our desires before we invest time and money in it. Angry Robot have used this to their advantage, putting "File under SCIENCE FICTION" or "File under FANTASY" on the back covers of the books they publish.

However, in eighty-plus years, no one has managed a satisfactory definition of science fiction. The best we can do is point at it. So it seems somewhat churlish to complain that *Debris*, the first book of the Veiled Worlds trilogy, is clearly labelled "SCIENCE FICTION" but does not actually read like science fiction.

Tanyana is a pion-binder and architect in the city of Movoc-under-Keeper in the nation of Varsnia. Pions are semi-sentient particles which underlie the reality of Tanyana's world. She can see these and mentally control them in order to perform tasks, such as reshaping reality into buildings. Other pion-binders use them generate heat, or light, or transport. The entire technological base of Varsnia is based on pions. They are...magical.

While working on her latest project, a giant statue called Grandeur, mysterious red pions attack Tanyana, causing her to fall from a great height. She is badly

injured, and loses her ability to see and manipulate pions.

Now she can see "debris", left behind when pions change things. Their presence hinders pions, so they must be regularly collected. This is a job for the lowest of the low. Tanyana has in her fall from Grandeur also fallen from grace. She is convinced it was all a put-up job – who was controlling those mysterious red pions? – but despite her best efforts, she does not discover who, why or even how, the conspiracy responsible for her situation has done what it did to her.

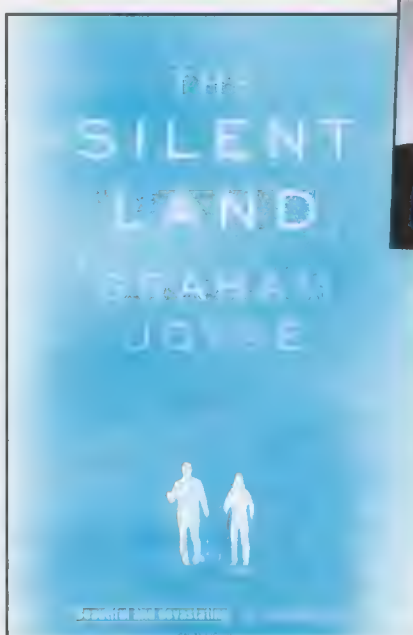
After being fitted with a "suit", a force-field generated by bracelets, anklets, a belt and a collar bonded to Tanyana's flesh, she goes to work with a team of debris collectors. This involves trawling the streets of the city, scooping up whatever debris they find, and sealing it in special jars. Of late there have been an unusual number of large and dangerous debris outbreaks. And Tanyana appears to have more, and finer, control over her suit – and indeed over debris – than is normal.

I can find no science in *Debris*; I can find no science fiction. This is no bad thing per se. The science fiction may well be hidden; it's a common enough technique. Anderton is plainly an author who likes to keep things close to her chest: there are no answers in *Debris*, and the workings of its world are very much kept off-stage. There is no explanation of pions. And the explanation of debris, when it is finally revealed, seems to involve a magical being living in another dimension.

This close-handedness gives the erroneous impression not much happens in the book, but there's still much to like. The world-building is very strong, as is the writing. The characters are perhaps drawn a little broadly, and Tanyana's fall from grace follows a well-used parabola. There are one or two scenes which spoil the otherwise easy read from start to finish.

In one, Tanyana returns to her flat to discover a pair of thugs lurking on the doorstep. She owes her landlord money so the thugs tie her up and then ransack her apartment for possessions to the value of her debt. The apartment is in a prestigious area of the city, but such behaviour seems more likely in the slum to which Tanyana moves.

That finish, however, is less a resolution than it is a slingshot into the next volume. *Debris* builds expectation. It only remains to be seen whether book two of the trilogy satisfies that expectation.



## THE SILENT LAND

Graham Joyce

Gollancz, 256pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Peter Tennant

Jake and Zoe are holidaying at the ski resort of Saint-Bernard-en-Haut in the French Alps, and decide to start their day with an early morning session before everyone else hits the piste. It's a bad decision, as the couple are caught in an avalanche, with Zoe buried in snow and Jake having to dig her out. Lucky to be alive, they slowly make their way back to civilisation, only to find that not only is their hotel empty but so is the entire village, with none of the phone lines working. The only logical conclusion to be reached is that a more significant avalanche is pending and the village has been evacuated, but it's a view that becomes increasingly impossible to maintain as their every effort to leave Saint-Bernard-en-Haut is thwarted. The longer they remain trapped in the village the more they see to suggest that not everything is right with this scenario – candles don't burn down as they should, meat doesn't go off.

The novel comes in three distinct stages. The first is entirely realistic in tone and intent, the tale of a couple on holiday who get caught up in a natural disaster. Joyce uses this to embed his tale in our world, to fill in some of the characters' back story (an ongoing process throughout the novel, and Joyce cannily doesn't reveal all that he knows about his fictional creations,

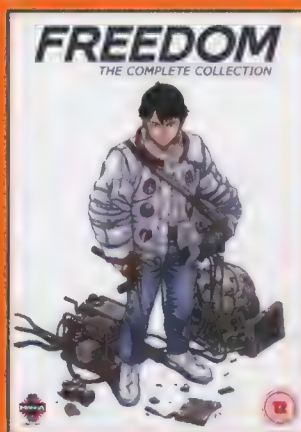
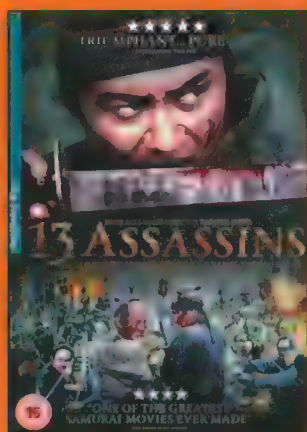


leaving the reader to fill in the gaps and bond more surely). Zoe, the main pov character, and Jake are an engaging couple, two people still deeply in love and desiring each other, obviously so, but at the same time it's a relationship

that has seen bad times, with no go areas and secrets buried deep, jealousy and resentment as part of the mix. It's idyllic, but not unrealistically ideal, a relationship of the kind that many of us will recognise and be able to identify with.

In the second stage, while the relationship remains realistic the setting becomes increasingly outré, with the characters' growing realisation that they may have died in the avalanche and become stranded on another plane of existence. What matters here is not so much where they have landed up as how they respond to their situation. They can ski all day, have sex in every room of the hotel including the lift, drink expensive champagne without worrying if they can afford it. In many ways they have been gifted a second honeymoon, one that need never end, or at least this is how it first appears, but there is a snake in this Eden and eventually it reveals itself. The meat begins to rot, the candles burn down, the power flickers on and off, while minatory figures surround the hotel, Joyce effortlessly imbuing his dreamlike narrative with tension and a genuine sense of menace.

And so we come to the final section, with the revelation of the couples' true situation, something I believe most readers will figure out long before Zoe and Jake, but any obviousness of the plot is an irrelevance by this stage, the story having gained an emotional force and momentum every bit as unstoppable as the avalanche that is the book's catalyst. As I read the final pages tears filled my eyes, and it didn't matter a jot that I was aware of how cleverly Joyce had manipulated my emotions, knowing exactly which heartstrings to tug on. The joy of *The Silent Land* is in the telling, the elegant prose that never sets a foot wrong, the way in which the author pulls it all together at the end, with incidental details becoming significant, and the authenticity of the emotions that he brings to the story. It's a heartrendingly sad book, but one that is ultimately uplifting and among the very best of what I've read this year.



## LASER FODDER TONY LEE

13 ASSASSINS

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THE EVENT

•  
FREEDOM

•  
THE DEVIL'S KISS

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GREEN LANTERN

•  
THE WOMAN

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ALIEN UNDEAD

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SAINT

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MANIAC COP

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ASSASSIN: CITY UNDER SIEGE

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PANIC BUTTON

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DEADLY BLESSING

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REDLINE

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SILENT RUNNING

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TRANSFORMERS:  
DARK OF THE MOON

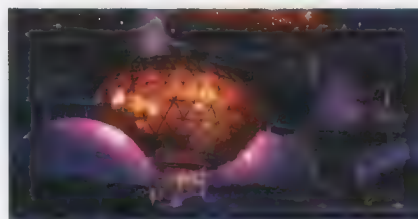
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FINAL DESTINATION 5



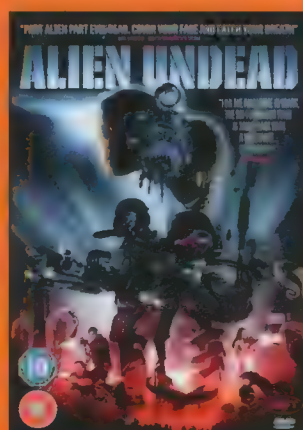
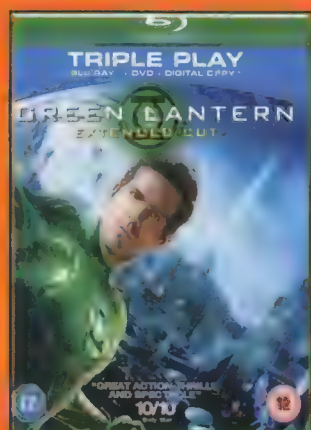
"He chose the path of hara-kiri... He's a mighty samurai." The remake of a 1960s b&w feature, Takashi Miike's **13 ASSASSINS** (Blu-ray/DVD, 5 September) is a magnificent *Seven Samurai* meets *The Dirty Dozen* plus one, detailing mid-19th century uprising against oppressive corruption, as coolly formal in tone and visual style as a Kurosawa epic. Here, Miike has managed to restrain his usually eclectic/wondrous, low-budget creativity so this lacks the typically bizarre comicbook flourishes which characterised many of the filmmaker's earlier works such as yakuza black comedy *Ichii the Killer*, or the hauntingly surreal qualities of rural adventure *Bird People in China*. Charting highly as horror during early scenes, there's a mutilated woman – missing hands and feet and tongue – yet her condition is only one of the grisly cruelties perpetrated by wicked Lord Naritsugu. Thankfully, he's eventually opposed by the vengefully righteous warriors of the title, and battle commences when 200 troops charge into a battlefield village of moving barricades. With the explosive demolition of a bridge, a stampede of burning bulls, and a 45-minute finale of good sword-fighting action but little bloodletting, this is not a chambara splatter fest until its furious climactic scenes, a suicidal struggle for justice chaptered with the ugly-blip deaths of identikit genre heroes. "Ready to die...?"



And then, the passenger flight crashes... But does the soft liberal US president (Blair Underwood), targeted by that hijacked plane, survive? Ill-timed flashbacks to some supposedly exciting anti-terrorist action distract us, but mean nothing really because a week ago the courting couple went on a Caribbean cruise and, months earlier, the government conspiracy was exposed – yet nothing happened. So let's



"Once upon a time, this was a launch-pad." Three hundred years after Apollo, kids are racing superbikes on the Moon while the Earth is tragically reported uninhabitable. Heroic lunar boys enjoy spelunking chases through service tunnels,



cut to our young hero just finding out what's really going on – music cues suggest it is something that's very important! – although he's been framed for murder and so we are none the wiser, and it was five years ago when boy-meets-girl clichés made an arbitrary chronological starting point for current crises of a kidnapping, the belated response to that military cover-up of the postwar landing in Alaska when the human-like alien detainees first arrived (can they explain what's what?). And that's all I know! You must believe me... Blithely annoying introductory waffle, isn't it? Imagine a sci-fi telly serial 'structured' just like that. A common observation from media studies is that movies/other screen narratives are constructed in post-production by creative editing. However, in recent years, fractured plot-lines in cinema or serial TV have dismantled those mainstream, familiar processes for generating intrigue/suspense in long-form storytelling. On the world crisis monitor, **THE EVENT** (DVD, 3 October) was created – if that is the correct word – by Nick Wauters, and it's basically 24 crossbred with *Lost*,

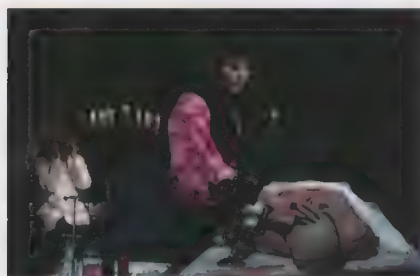
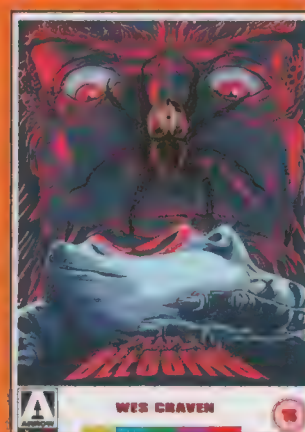
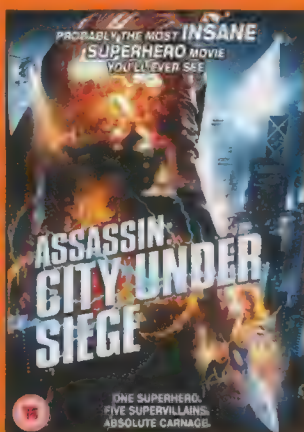
an ill-fated pairing arranged by the generic midwifery of *Taken* (2002) and *The 4400* (2004), and let us not forget a character reference provided by *The X-Files*. Among its clutch of random skiffy clichés patched together with expedient cynicism there are patriotic CIA agents, scheming disloyal politicians, apparently sincere but untrustworthy ET leadership by Sophia (Laura Innes, from *ER*), and a disagreeably bland protagonist (Jason Ritter) who thinks he's Jack Bauer but has even less training or genuinely heroic credibility than Sam Witwicky, and who struggles through a mystery mix peppered with hidden agendas where any truth (out there) is unlikely to be revealed, until every cliffhanger opportunity is exploited without questioning its contribution to the faltering rocket of a story-arc which never manages to reach escapism velocity. Dramatic TV serials like *Damages* make poignant and fascinating use of the jigsaw-puzzle storytelling models, but *The Event* is merely a broadside muddle with its obvious stereotypes, hackneyed episodic developments, aimlessly shuffled long-joins, and vacuous misdirection that

irritates with the confusions of a 'script' hammered out by a gaggle of monkeys – and certainly not enough monkeys, available for typing aeons, to produce that proverbial/mythic work of Shakespearean literature either. This is a dreary failure as sci-fi soap, another horribly contrived waste of network resources for slick TV production values, and it insults genre literate viewers with blatant false alarms, emotive blathering, and the overdue release of piecemeal clues and vital information that's all clearly intended to generate viewer anxiety and refresh interest, but simply bores us with its recaps or its action-replays (only moments after we have already watched that scene!), perhaps for the worst ADD sufferers? Its hacked-up sequences – which tend to bulge out when they should thrust forwards and backtrack quite unwisely whenever anything occurs to spark a fleeting interest – always dissipate both curiosity and emotional significance as rapidly as possible. *The Event* is a never-ending card trick by a gambling joker hoping to keep us guessing while testing everyone's patience. So, anticipate disappointment "or many people will die".

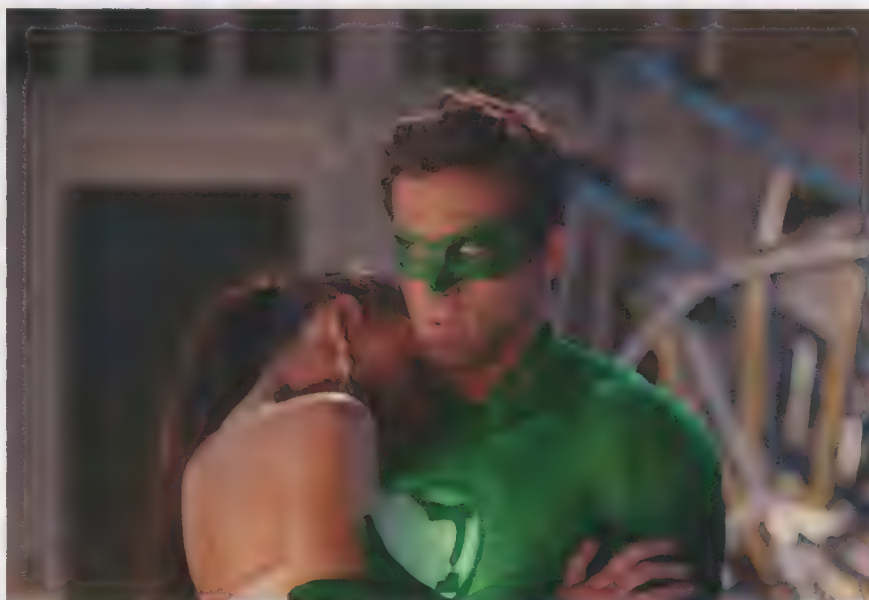
with oppressively authoritarian guards and mecha droids in pursuit...until the fervent hope/optimism of a message ('laughter, love, legacy') in a 'bottle' prompts a space journey inspired by alternative world tales of a forgotten *Apollo 18* crew: Lee, Lifeson, and Peart (natch!). Made in 2006, anime TV serial **FREEDOM** (DVD/Blu-ray, 10 October) presents seven episodes of a sci-fi discovery/ethical conflict scenario that's somewhat reminiscent of George McCowan's appalling 'sequel/remake' *The Shape of Things to Come* (1979). Geeky romantic adventure fairy tale embraces

a magical future-history tour of various sci-fi tropes, including a disconcerting jumble of borrowings from *Logan's Run*, *Star Wars*, *Damnation Alley* and *The Postman*, with retro 1960s/1970s futurism of pulp keening that's childishly simplistic but still an emotive paean to stereotypes of astro aspirations, pitched against juvenilia scale of tech/biker rebels from the vast domed underground city of Eden on the dark side of the Moon. Takeru and sidekick escape to Earth (well, it's not rocket science apparently!), finding a mystery girl who Takeru fell in lust with

after her photo landed in a moon-shot crater. Shuhei Morita's *Freedom* falls into the usual sci-fi TV anime trap of depicting rampaging mega-robots as tools of cruel and irrational tyranny. There's a catchy J-pop theme with an evocative montage of motivational spacer/film design images but unfortunately it promises more than the muddled up narrative of this rather mediocre series ever delivers as genre tribute to golden age SF because, overall, it lacks the sheer imagination and startling artistry of Rintaro's similarly elegiac animated homage *Metropolis* (2001).



Some films are obscure because they remain elusive, unseen due to poor distribution. Others deserve their obscurity because they are such poor quality. **THE DEVIL'S KISS** (DVD, 17 October) made in 1975 by Jordi 'Georges' Gigó starts with a fashion show in the cellars of a chateau. Groovy! Oh dear, after-sales séance is with a witchy medium who could be Barbara Steele's ugly cousin. She's the horsewoman who finds a midget Roger Daltrey running about in the woods. A corpse is exhumed by grave-robbers for satanic resurrection, and those wrong rites enable zombification under psychic power remote control of a mad doctor stereotype. In most so-bad-it's-good assessments, bad or good contrasts of cult aesthetic appeal typically depend upon a signal to noise ratio of elements that confuse or enlighten, disgust or delight, mock or respect. Here, let us weigh up gratuitous nudity with attendant voyeurism (Patrick Swayze's doppelgänger is a photographer of cheesecake glam), against beguilement of a nonsensical mystery plotline, which could have been unintentionally surreal but serves no actual purpose except filling in the gaps between somnambulism and violent set-pieces. Does this, in fact, offer keen advancement of themes or tropes beyond genre clichés and euro-trash conventions? No. Stifled by cheapskate mediocrity, it's simply too stupid to laugh at.



Contrarily, in this particular strand of the DC comics' multiverse, yellow, not green, is the colour of fear, and green is the colour of willpower! With its "billions of years ago" introductory narration, **GREEN LANTERN** (Blu-ray/DVD, 17 October) ably sets up the intergalactic morality tale about Guardians of the Universe creating a Green Lantern corps of space cops, but with insufficient chutzpah to sustain fandom's hopes that this premier live-action feature of cosmic superhero adventures is going to be an effective rival to the mythical resonances found in Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978), and its immediate sequel, never mind convincing as yet another attempt to deify aliens, like Bryan Singer's undervalued blockbuster tribute *Superman Returns* (2006). Perhaps, in our cynical era, it's not possible to make a wholly serious SF/fantasy drama about superhero aliens. The exciting, yet ultimately playful or plainly

comedic, traditions of pulp sci-fi will out, overwhelming any sombre approach, no matter what a filmmaker intends to present. Thankfully, some degree of creativity by director Martin Campbell ensures that *Green Lantern* avoids the problem of typical men-in-tights farce which has plagued so many superhero movies in the past. Here, it's not just the cyber-plasm constructs of emerald hard-light force that are crafted in CGI, the character's glowing costume is a virtual overlay too. Test pilot Hal Jordan (Ryan Reynolds, good in *Nines* and *Buried*, but rather weak here) is the unlikely and reluctant new recruit to the GL corps, who finds himself morally/mortally challenged beyond limits of Flash Gordon courage. First, his former childhood friend (Peter Sarsgaard, *Orphan*) mutates into a psychic threat after performing a government-sanctioned postmortem on the dead alien whose UFO crashes on Earth during the

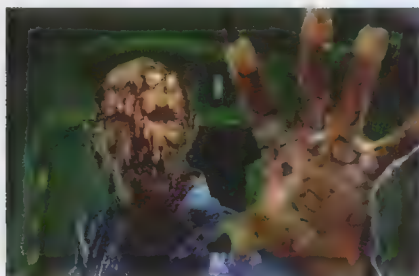


early scenes. Secondly, having washed out from the space warriors' boot-camp of GL academy basic training, hesitant hero Hal finds his home world is under attack by evil Parallax, a giant Lovecraftian smog-squid bringing a soul-eating horror to Earth. With its back story of super-science, and a human superhero battling a gigantic monster that descends from space, this invites comparison to Tim Story's flawed but passable *Fantastic 4: Rise of The Silver Surfer* (2007), and tries to cram in almost as many spectacular rescue incidents (there's even a helicopter crash which interrupts a celebration, just like that *F4* sequel), subplots of dubious quality/irrelevant nature, including elements of family-friendly storytelling, and a Hollywood essential of the inevitable love interest: TV *Gossip Girl*, Blake Lively, plays another test pilot, in a nearly parodic fudge of GL comics lore, an obvious sop to populist cinema conventions. Overall, this is quite good, undemanding fun. Although the Guardians' planetary HQ 'Oa' lacks the visual magnificence of the Asgard realm in Kenneth Branagh's *Thor*, it's good to see other *Green Lantern* mainstays – represented by hulking Kilowog (voiced by Michael Clarke Duncan, *Daredevil*) and a red-skinned übermensch Sinestro (Mark Strong, *Kick-Ass*), whose teaser of betrayal during final credits neatly sets up the possibilities for a sequel in 2013 (but it's hardly a certainty) – make a stronger impression here than many of the other Norse 'deity' characters did in *Thor*. The HD transfer looks superb and this 'triple play' release (the DVD includes a digital copy) includes an extended cut – with lacklustre scenes of childhood flashback padding mostly – in addition to the cinema version, but that longer edit only features on the Blu-ray.



Based on a novel by Jack Ketchum and director Lucky McKee **THE WOMAN** (DVD/Blu-ray, 17 October) is, reportedly, a sequel of sorts to Ketchum's *Offspring* (filmed in 2009 by Andrew van den Houten). Also, even if it's vaguely similar in its basic idea of a captured female suffering abuse, *The Woman* is more intense as a modern genre shocker than Gregory Wilson's somewhat ugly torture-porn flick *The Girl Next Door*, an adaptation of Ketchum's other work. In *The Woman*, country solicitor Chris Cleek (Sean Bridgers, *Deadwood*) fools himself into thinking that he's taken a feral woman prisoner in order to civilise her. Of course, his cowed wife Belle soon realises that her bullying husband's intentions are entirely brutal. Despite quiet emotional intensities, that balloon domestic tensions and fill the Cleeks' family homestead with a dreadful misogynistic apprehension, the leavening

factors here include the welcome presence of McKee's regular lead actress Angela Bettis (so marvellous in *May* and *Masters of Horror* TV episode *Sick Girl*), a highly impressive portrayal of a forestland savage by Scottish export Pollyanna McIntosh (Stuart Hazeldine's *Exam*), and perfectly judged moments of gallows humour, before the deadly woman's inevitable escape and grisly vengeance. McKee is particularly skilled at generating unease and dark weirdness on a miniscule budget. In this effectively ominous chiller, he slowly turns the apparently 'ordinary' rural household into a symbolic microcosm of mankind's darkest sadistic impulses, where everything in the world that could possibly go wrong with the family unit sheltered in a moral vacuum is eventually revealed to be happening already (and who'd have thought it!?!), with appallingly tragic and suitably horrific results.



There is a common type of sci-fi horror actioner that's clearly derivative of the *Aliens* and *Predator* movies, repeats many clichés from zombie shockers, and is inspired by video game shoot 'em ups. As this model of genre movie making has only a tangential link to science fiction, and is principally concerned with just killing large numbers of aliens/mutants/flesh-eating ghouls, or alien-mutant-zombies, let's coin the term 'die-fi'. A good example is Greg Connors' low-budget awfulness **ALIEN UNDEAD** (DVD, 31 October), originally titled *The Dark Lurking*, an allegedly futuristic blood 'n' thunder fest from Australia. Of course, it's not really snobbery to infer the re-titling is simply following a marketing diktat of using obvious checklist wordplay to fit a genre mould. *Alien Undead* is a fanboy product by a novice filmmaker whose homagist hackwork is slapdash sketchy montages of 'exciting' (read as wholly unoriginal) die-fi images that blatantly mimic several

classics/favourites like the aforementioned *Aliens*/*Predator* colliding franchises, plus *Pandorum*, *Resident Evil*, and (especially!) *Ghosts of Mars*, jumbled together in a bunker with – most unfortunately – *The Evil Dead*. It's a basic wannabe thriller packed with crazy gunmen, various ugly fierce creatures perhaps of demonic stock, jittery targets for zombie splatter, and a nominal heroine hybrid who's not who or what she appears... Even core scenes of paranormality are fashioned using a proverbial shitload of bio-weapons grade 'exploitationite'. This is not a cult-worthy prospect then, only a dirty-bomb of wretched schlock that would have been multiplex box-office poison if granted a general release. *Alien Undead* vaguely resembles some of the cheesy genre knock-offs that Albert Pyun churned out for video back in 1980s/1990s (and he's still doing it!), but Connors' dismally uninteresting effort lacks a hint of the quirky humour which distinguished even Pyun's middling endeavours. Another failing of *Alien Undead* is that its leading cast features not even one second-rate 'star' or failing A-list actor whose presence might have appealed to the cognoscenti of trash movies. The director's short film debut *Netherworld* (2005) is included here as DVD extra, and it's a grungy fantasy revenger of a fallen angel that's actually far better than Connors' main feature!



While sensible physicists tout a 'super-symmetry' of theoretical particle 'partnerships' with such dippy names as neutralinos, winos, and the stop squark, nothing in modern science seems quite as laughably absurd as religious faith – still present and politically incorrect, spreading the dogmas of irrationality in 21st century society. Is it time for a change? No, it's long overdue. Let's demonise any unquestioning beliefs, starting with the ceremonial figureheads of attendant myths. Christ, king of all zombies, and then... A comedy horror with Xmas appeal, Dick Maas' **SAINT** (DVD, 31 October) is about the killer bishop Niklas (Huub Stapel, hero of Maas' classic thriller *Amsterdamned*), who during the Full Moon on 5th December kidnaps children whether they are naughty or nice. Since the lunar cycle only coincides with winter's calendar about every thirty years, today's students share a disbelief in the 'threat' of a Santa Claus. This is challenged by gun-toting trigger-happy obsessed maverick cop Goert (Bert Luppens,



Written by the great Larry Cohen, directed by William Lustig (maker of the notorious *Maniac*, 1980), B-movie **MANIAC COP** (Blu-ray/DVD, 31 October) still has much to commend it to fans of subversive cross-genre 1980s' horror thrillers/urban mayhem. It's a surprisingly effective city-psycho nightmare, tapping into the anxieties of police fascism previously depicted in actioner *Magnum Force* (1973), and the viral fears of a faceless killer best portrayed in *Halloween* (1978). When every uniformed officer is a potential murderer, then who can the victimised

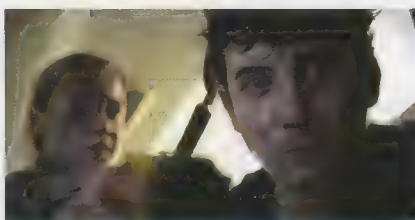
turn to for help or protection? With Bruce Campbell (already a genre star with two *Evil Dead* flicks on his résumé) and Laurene Landon (so good in *Hundra*) in leading roles, alongside Tom Atkins as the wholly obsessive detective, this has cult appeal etched into every frame. Cleverly, a supernatural ambiguity emerges from its sketchy back story, and a figure of hulking menace-with-a-badge is well achieved for such an obviously low-budget production. The lantern-jawed big villain played by Robert Z'Dar is revealed to be the supposedly murdered cop Matt Cordell who, despite the odds against him, uses sinisterly random violence to provoke an investigation into his own 'death'. Cohen and Lustig's likeable and enterprising collaboration continued in a couple of sequels – neither of which are actually bad films, although they both failed to match the comedic/visceral impact of this one. At this year's New York City Horror Film Festival, Lustig is presented with a lifetime achievement award.



Japan's bio-weapons project to create super-soldiers for WW2 fails when their secret underground labs in Malaysia are bombed by British forces. In the present day, some unwary circus performers discover the forgotten caves and are exposed to smoky the wonder gas which mutates all of them. Benny Chan's *City Under Siege* is released on DVD (7 November) as **ASSASSIN: CITY UNDER SIEGE**. An amusing sci-fi actioner, it's a Hong Kong production

grouchy to his last breath), whose official reports distinguishing mere folklore from the supernatural menace of an evil St Nick are jeered by colleagues and ignored by superiors. Basically, this is a seasonal slasher fantasy, where the night of snowy flurries provides cover for Niklas' slayings of kids on their way to a costume party. Attacks are usually preceded by electricity failures, highly symbolic of suppressed modernity as hijacked morality of a bitter piety descends upon unashamedly independent thinkers of youth and the vulnerable innocents. There are dodgy digital visuals of horse-riding across rooftops. Victims are pulled up chimney stacks. Fog swamps the canals in old Amsterdam. It's all good cheesy fun with 'indestructible' villainy, including a zombified horse, bullet-proof but not impervious to fire. Gore fiends should find sufficient limb-hacking and violent impalements to sate their thirst for bloody urban havoc. The crew of a police patrol boat confront what lurks in the ghost-ship schooner. Of course, there's a government conspiracy in effect, concealing a terrible truth about hundreds of 'missing' children. *Saint* is a largely fright-free addition to cruel Yule mania but it's enjoyable due to the skilled director's efficient revitalisation of sundry genre clichés from the awful horror of Christmastime. Fans of John Carpenter's *The Fog* will probably like this one a lot.

which stars Aaron Kwok (Pang brothers' *Storm Warriors*) as feckless clown Sunny, who's lost at sea but soon washes up in Kowloon to find he's got various adaptive X-powers. Using only a stick, in lieu of flying dagger super kung fu, he solves a hostage crisis. HKPD call in special agents to investigate following the spate of robberies by superhuman baddies (who become increasingly monstrous and feral) who regular cops cannot fight. Shu Qi (*So Close*, *Transporter*) is TV reporter Angel, who latches onto Sunny as a big news story but then falls in love with him. With Sunny's newfound media stardom there are satirical sketches to cringe at, while the film rumbles on, switching between absurdist farce, romantic tragedy and fantasy action. Sentimental overkill betrays any poignancy that a good-versus-evil finale may have had but, still, there is no denying much of this is entertaining and spectacular, as comicbook excitements ensue with plenty of imaginative wirework stunts amidst the outbreaks of blatant CGI candy.



**PANIC BUTTON** (DVD/Blu-ray, 7 November) concerns two women and two blokes, all regular users of a British social networking website, who are delighted to have won an expenses-paid trip (in a private plane) to New York. However, on the flight, they must agree to play ridiculously sinister mind-games with strict rules and disturbing forfeits – the first of which are privacy and dignity. While attempting to fly the kite of generic imagination higher than anyone else, here's a rookie director mistaking the frequency of plot twists for a suspenseful narrative, and the public washing of dirty laundry and outed closet skeletons for intriguing

character development. Ultimately, a potentially tense screen storyline crashes and burns very soon after takeoff. In a scenario clearly inspired by crucible terrors of the *Saw* franchise, victimised contestants are quizzed under duress into participating in the online freak-show with their anonymous game host and psychological tormentor. The ecto-digital omniscience of a cartoon alligator means *Panic Button* often aspires to a techno-thriller categorisation, but presenting flashbacks to socially damning evidence of character flaws or illicit activity alongside simultaneous events in a nightmarish virtuality for emotional impacts on characters' reality generates only disbelief in such aptly-timed orchestrated coercion. Sadly, it is too farfetched and relentlessly flat, and so gruelling an ordeal to watch, that up to 50% of cases involving typically sentient but unwary viewers will result in sudden hospitalisation for overexposure to dramatically inexplicable brain rot.

"I'll be damned if these guys don't eat brimstones for breakfast." Between a TV movie of witchcraft mystery, *Summer of Fear* (aka *Stranger in our House*, 1978), and sci-fi comicbook adaptation *Swamp Thing* (1982), the melodramatics of religious mania in **DEADLY BLESSING** (DVD, 14 November) sit uneasily on the early career timeline of decidedly hit-and-miss genre filmmaker Wes Craven. It explores middle ground (and middlebrow) themes of psychological and rural horror that are quite distinct from the ultra-violence of the director's *Last House on the Left* and the dreamscape imageries launched by the overly franchised *Nightmare on Elm Street* series. Although, like the Amish, they clearly despise electricity, machines (including John Deere tractors) and all modern conveniences, and embrace a default philosophy of ignoring any outsiders whenever possible, the isolationist 'Hittites' of *Deadly Blessing* "make the Amish look like swingers," and this drama offers a markedly less sympathetic reading ("You need the fear of God in thee!") of any such devout church-loving 'fellowship' communities than those to be found in Peter Weir's archly romantic thriller *Witness* (1985). Oddly, shot in Texas, *Deadly Blessing* shows the moral trials and fates of three women – two are houseguests of widowed Martha (Maren Jensen, the original *Battlestar Galactica* TV), and it's poor Lana (Sharon

Stone) who's notably reduced to a crazily despondent wreck after she's trapped in a barn with a hanged man, and then later endures a quite horrific daydream about spiders. Arguably, bereaved Martha has an even worse fright with a snake in her bath water, but she remains heroically capable, defiantly coping, in extremis, while her friend succumbs to distress and despair. Chief among the Hittites, Isaiah (Ernest Borgnine, in coldly furious stare-down mode, not eye-rolling madness) is thoroughly estranged (despite still being her farmland neighbour!) as Martha's own father-in-law, and wholly dysfunctional as wise man or uncaring beast. Apparently a true believer who perhaps spends more time grooming his frivolous beard than trying to maintain a level head in vital matters, like unsolved murder, where the local sheriff must intervene. Famously creepy genre regular Michael Berryman (Pluto in Craven's earlier *The Hills Have Eyes*) is adequate as the retarded peeping tom, but it's quite a stretch for viewers to accept beautiful blonde Lisa Hartman (*Not of This World*, *Red Wind*, TV soap *Knots Landing*) as a local boy who's being raised as a girl. Craven is at pains to maintain his unfolding narrative's realistic if bizarre framework right up to a blatantly supernatural twist ending, which sees Martha's exit from the mortal realm, and portends the misfortunate Jensen's departure from showbiz.



Not connected to Andy Cheng's 2007 live-action film of the same title, anime feature **REDLINE** (DVD/Blu-ray, 14 November) is a space opera version of racetrack movies, inspired by the likes of *Speed Racer*, *Wacky Races*, *Death Race*, *Cannonball Run* et al. First-time director Takeshi Koike ('World Record' segment of *Animatrix*) makes the best of a screenplay by his frequent creative collaborator Katsuhito Ishii (maker of *Funky Forest*, *Party 7*, *Sharkskin Man* and *Peach-Hip Girl*). Although it's packed with sci-fi visuals, these racers opt for wheel-spinning retro tech instead of

anti-grav hover-mobiles and, in the lengthy prologue, antiheroic rock 'n' roll daredevil dude JP wrecks his modified but replica classic Trans-Am (complete with nitro boosters), but doesn't scrag his pompadour. Winner of that 'yellowline' race, Sonoshee – Cherry Boy Hunter, the new queen of speed in her mach one hydrofoil Crab vehicle – also qualifies for the titular event on a DMZ moon of Roboworld, a planet with a population of mutants and weirdos, from where televised sports coverage "broadcasting live to the cosmos" eventually reveals and revels in nonstop road rage as fierce rivalry of all competitors means they practically declare war upon each other. However, apocalyptic cybernetic weaponry of the planetary authorities opposed to the renegade 'redliners', and outlaw race maniacs invading satellite territory, worsens a volatile situation for all concerned. Roboworld's megalomaniacal

president barely hesitates before stooping to violate the galactic peace treaty in his warmongering efforts to spoil everybody's fun in a popular media happening. Meanwhile, noirish mafia oddballs run gambling rackets and plot a fix, as top racing teams of pop-stars/gear-heads/rabid lunatics converge on unlikely victory. Hand-drawn animation instead of expected CGI depicts crushing acceleration in impressionistic fashion. There's witty comedy, media satire, and comicbook action in this story of obsession and friendship, romance and nostalgia that avoids the usual modes of similar cross-genre anime so this never once feels like a game format movie. Predictably, hero and heroine, JP and Sonoshee, team up for a last desperate dash to the finishing line, a finale so orgasmically climactic in its velocity raptures it's almost transcendental. 'Speeding kills'? No. Here, speed's the ultimate 'freedom' metaphor.



Joni Mitchell's pop classic 'Big Yellow Taxi' includes a line about a tree museum that, in retrospect, seems to anticipate **SILENT RUNNING** (celebrating its 40th anniversary with a Blu-ray, 14 November). I have wondered what Douglas Trumbull's first movie would have been like with the pithy humour of Mitchell as songwriter instead of the dourly earnest Joan Baez. Perhaps contributions from Mitchell would have made eco fable *Silent Running* more weirdo like *Dark Star*. Both films share substantial thematic and stylistic parallels with Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, but their essential differences are matters of tone and philosophical affect (tragicomic activist, profound futurism). *Silent Running* and *Dark Star* belong to the 1970s era, rooted firmly in woolly conservationist concerns/psycho slacker/junkie hippiedom while, inarguably, 1968's *Space Odyssey* is

timeless. And yet a distancing effect of the Moon-watcher into Star-child evolutionary development in 2001 contrasts markedly with *Silent Running*, and makes its absurdly 'green' eco-warrior message even more relevant today – in our last gleaming twilight of climate change – than ever before. A loony loner, eccentric spacer hero Freeman Lowell (Bruce Dern) stares in wild blue-eyed intensity while ranting about preservation of his surviving forests at any cost, including human life. Growing under the geodesic domes of gigantic interplanetary freighters, the ultimate 'hanging gardens' from Earth are doomed to nuclear destruction as all of these final pockets of nature are abandoned by corporate indifference or greed when the fleet of cargo ships are recalled home from Saturn's orbit. As his occupation becomes obsession, Lowell kills his shipmates

(quirkily imitating the homicidal HAL 9000 AI in 2001), escaping from contractual obligation and blasting off course through Saturn's rings, adding only a flimsy spectacle to this picture if judged against Trumbull's 'Stargate' sequence created five years earlier for Kubrick. The HD image quality boasts grain but it also does the once cutting-edge top quality model effects no favours, exposing the obvious miniatures and specific matte shots as rather dated when compared to the hi-tech realism achieved by the very latest digital creations. So, apart from its aforementioned environmental message, *Silent Running* is at its very best when Lowell interacts with the robot drones, anthropomorphised as Huey, Dewey, and Louie (Disney triplet nephews of Donald Duck). Employing double amputees to wear the robot suits proved an inspired move, granting the droids a lifelike motion that simple remote-controlled mechanics could, evidently, never hope to match on the production's limited budget. Further creative savings were made by the use of a decommissioned aircraft carrier with its substructure redressed as the main decks of the *Valley Forge* freighter, ensuring many spacecraft interiors are solidly impressive sets. Hardware aside, though, Trumbull's first directorial effort is an important genre milestone for highlighting 21st century issues of a living bio-diversity a decade before that particular term even became commonly used.



"We are not alone," observes astronaut Buzz Aldrin during the 1969 flashback which establishes a UFO conspiracy/NASA black ops' back story for **TRANSFORMERS: DARK OF THE MOON** (DVD/Blu-ray, 28 November). A second sequel to 2007's blockbuster live-actioner *Transformers*, this loudly celebrates director Michael Bay's unenviable – yet decidedly auteurist – reputation as cinema's primary 'incredible explosions' man of today, or any day. While the clanking shape-shifting alien A.I. race of Autobots are on global mission-critical assignments for western democracy, mechanically evil foes the Decepticons unleash gigantic mecha

worm Shockwave from the dead zone of abandoned Chernobyl, and these bad bots are plotting to enslave all humanity, ready to serve the machines after they import living planet home-world Cybertron via teleport to Earth orbit. Gosh! Yes, here's another feature-length epic advertisement (cost: nearly \$200 million) for branded toys and fancy cars. With young hero Sam ('everyman' superstar Shia LaBeouf) back in motor-mouth trouble, juggling demands of new girlfriend (Brit model Rosie Huntington-Whiteley) and imminent threats to a fragile peace between cartoon robots, this movie remixes disposable sci-fi tropes of *Skyline*, reducing a *War of the Worlds* invasion to pop video backdrops.

It is too lightweight and ridiculous to be called popcorn comedy, as Bay's approach to humour – including some apocalyptic embarrassments of toilet gags and gay sitcom – is often like sneezing on a dark matter detector and just hoping that at least the ultra-sensitive instrument will remain dry. See Bay's handling of top quality actors John Turturro, John Malkovich, and Frances McDormand (although she's trying her best while co-stars are coasting) for evidence of this director's crippling inability to tell even genre jokes that can sustain characters beyond empty cyphers. Furthermore, Bay is practicing robotic anthropomorphism to extremes of obnoxious (sexist, racist) caricatures, so *Transformers 3* is not endearing in its childish simplicity. However, we must give Bay his due merit. He deploys varied hardware – whether futuristic or contemporary, whimsical or realistic – like no other film director, creating such spectacular techno impact that, were it not for his infantile wrestling mega-robots and kung fu slapstick droids, *Transformers* would honestly be one of the greatest sci-fi thrillers yet produced. Managing to find time for topicalities, including a space shuttle launch (albeit modified, and heading for a disaster evocative of *Challenger*), and urban scenes of mass destruction like a toppling skyscraper which easily outdoes the overrated *Cloverfield*, Bay delivers a wildly uneven fun-fest of mad militaristic/'super-hero' stunts and wholly uncountable/inconsequential explosions.



Made in 3D, **FINAL DESTINATION 5** (DVD/Blu-ray, 26 December) belabours episodic, tragicomic doom-plotting for a damned generation trapped by escape-proof destiny. A coach load of workers

from a paper mill narrowly avoid the collapse of a suspension bridge after one of them has a premonition of disaster. As usual for this sadly variable franchise, the choices each survivor makes now mean suffering horrible new fates due to 'something'. A spate of random incidents or mishaps result in fatal accidents: at the gym, ouch, that must have hurt ("This is some freaky shit"); in a spa massage parlour farce that will teach one annoying and horny clerk not to play with fire ("Guys, you're not gonna believe this"); laser eye surgery (sucks air in through teeth), oh, very dodgy business for a nervous patient; and on the factory floor of the trouble-bound paper mill, where the workers always wear hard-hats for a good reason, dude! With bad karma, violent kismet, that darkness closes in, as the workmates are stalked by Death itself.

Tony Todd is handily available as recurring character, creepy coroner Blutworth, to explain what's going on to the easily baffled victims-in-waiting. Peter (Tom Cruise lookalike Miles Fisher) tries to play hero for his girlfriend. The ordered sequence of losses generates a modicum of suspense but this is only a weak clockwork template for the supernatural 'death wish' listing. A busy restaurant kitchen becomes one likely death-trap for a young apprentice (don't leave the gas on!). Youngsters who don't "deserve to die" seem to expect or yearn for immortality in an indifferent universe, which is sad and funny at the same time. The movie wraps with a greatest hits medley of action replay kills from previous *Final Destination* pictures, unsubtly enhanced by 3D for that unappealing in-your-face affect. Watch this if you dare, but, hey, let's be careful out there...

# MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

IN TIME

•  
CONTAGION•  
PERFECT SENSE•  
MELANCHOLIA•  
TROLLHUNTER•  
APOLLO 18•  
MIDNIGHT IN PARIS•  
THE CHANGE-UP•  
REAL STEEL

"Is it stealing if it's already stolen?" is the mantra of Andrew Niccol's time-is-money fable **IN TIME**, whose Bonnie and Clyde leads embark on a gun-toting rampage of anti-capitalist direct action involving bank raids, kidnapping, and organised mass looting, with the film's wholesale approval. Harlan Ellison and his lawyers have taken a dimmer view, recognising (as you'd have to have both eyes shot out not to see) that the film is a daft mashup of *Logan's Run* with his own "Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktockman': one of the five most reprinted stories in sf history, and the single most famous work of sf's most determined IP litigant. Repeat offender Niccol has previous in this area, though in the case of the *The Truman Show* it was at least possible to argue that the similarities to Dick's *Time Out of Joint* arose from an entirely different premise and rationale. But here we not only have, as in Ellison, a citizenry fined in lifespan for timecode infractions through the remote administration of body clocks, but a plot specifically pitting an anarchist hero against an authoritarian "timekeeper". There are, of course, all kinds of significant differences, notably that Niccol's film isn't about a clockpunching mechanisation of routine but a radical

free-market chrononomy in which the life itself is quantified as currency and the proletariat live literally from day to day to sustain a ghastly elite of infinitely leisured immortals, while for its part Ellison's story isn't about Justin Timberlake running interminably wrist-in-hand through LA with Amanda Seyfried in a designer frock.

For the defence, Niccol's version of Ellison's scenario is clevered up for cinema in ways that in a more coherent film might amount to brilliance. If nothing else, Niccol has come up with a formula for a film in which every single character is 25 and beautiful; in which the currency of game points not only determines the whole plot but is permanently displayed as an illuminated count on their bodies; and in which every scene involves running against the clock to achieve a life-or-death goal. You wouldn't think it possible to go wrong with such a setup. But what sinks *In Time* is a pathological disdain for the ordinary courtesies of plotting. The Hollywood requisites are all there: the lingering dad business, the execution of mom in the first act (one of three this month), the Stockholm-syndrome fantasy of hot spoiled rich chicks falling for the first bit of underclass rough to abduct them at gunpoint. But not a single character

choice makes any motivational sense, and entire plotlines peter out in indecisive shuffling between incompatible drafts: the Johnny Galecki character, the dad story, the motivation and alignment of Cillian Murphy's *Equilibrium*-trenchcoated timekeeper (whose eventual fate is the single most ludicrous moment in a film you scarcely thought could get more so).

The whole premise is unsalvageably daft on any actual science-fictional level. Ellison at least had the manners to specify a mechanism by which the authorities could regulate lifespan remotely; but *In Time* isn't going there. We're not allowed to ask how the body clocks function, how the arm displays work, or how ageing is arrested after 25, let alone how a programme of premature genocide of the labour force is supposed to maximise production. "For a few to be immortal," we're told with a wave of the hand, "many must die. Everyone can't live forever; where would we put them?" But early in the film the factory-worker hero is let in on the great secret: "The truth is, there's more than enough. No-one has to die before his time." As a parable about class and capital for a world in recession, *In Time* is as in your face as a stamping Orwellian boot. "This is Darwinian capitalism," explains the plutocratic patriarch. "Only the strong survive." Yet if resources aren't the limiting factor, why is it in the interests of the elite to conserve them? Niccol's best film, *Simone*, was silly in many of the same ways, but that at least had a sense of irony about it.

So Ellison finds himself playing Harlequin to the Ticktockman his own creation has created, in this latest collision of worlds between a science fiction whose vital currency is ideas and a Hollywood which thinks it can draw a firm economic distinction between manufactured intellectual property and the commodities market in conceptual raw materials, where everything is freely recycled. This summer's *Spy Kids 4D: All the Time in the World* already had a "Timekeeper" nemesis, a master plan fuelled by the theft of time from ordinary people's lives, and a stream of dreadful wordplay on idioms involving the word "time"; while *In Time*'s proletarian outsider infiltrating the elite is a direct recycle from Niccol's own *Gattaca*, and the whole plot essentially a palimpsest of *Metropolis* anyway. "Don't think of it as stealing," says Seyfried to her victims: "Think of it as repossession." It'll be interesting to see whether the courts agree.



Steven Soderbergh's **CONTAGION** is only too aware of its own forebears in *The Andromeda Strain* and *Outbreak*, from which it seeks to distinguish itself by a refreshingly hard-science take on its genre and a cheeky game of spot-the-hero amid its teeming disaster-movie cast of celebrities, with six different plotlines that in the event barely pretend to cross. In Minneapolis, Matt Damon is widower zero, suddenly bereft of wife and son after Gwyneth Paltrow's ill-advised foreign business adventure and adulterous layover in O'Hare take her swiftly from a nasty cough to a celebrity brain autopsy. For a while it seems that Kate Winslet's rookie CDC field agent, sent to manage the response in Minneapolis, is being groomed for leading ladyhood and a hookup with Matt, but like Elliott Gould's triumphant sequencing maverick she fizzles out prematurely, while Marion Cotillard's WHO epidemiologist, in a completely separate Geneva-Macau plotline, threatens to do the same before a very belated reappearance at the end that goes literally nowhere. Meanwhile we have despicable scaremongering opportunist Jude Law in the villain role of a lifetime as, in effect, the internet, which he topically chooses to play with an Australian accent; while back in Atlanta, Laurence Fishburne is a saintly CDC boss and Jennifer Ehle his grimly professional chief scientist who between them incrementally emerge as the story's true heroes.

It's an oddly shaped film in theme as well as narrative. On the one hand, *Contagion* is one of the very, very few films

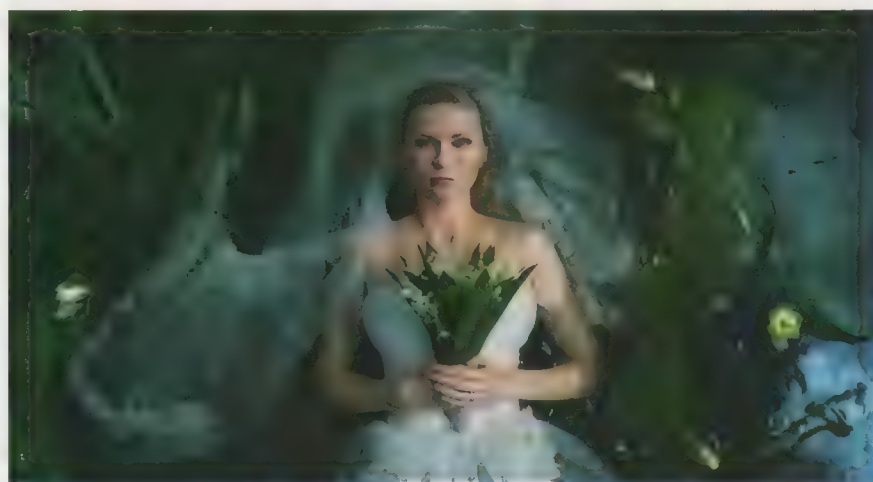
to heroic real-world science, and not just for its superior heuristic claims to truth and rigour, but for its ethical integrity in a politicised and commercialised world. The epidemiology is impeccable, and presented with exemplary lucidity by Winslet and the other boffins, even if their nemesis, in the form of Law's profiteering conspiracy-peddler secretly in league with big homeopathy, is so heavily composited as to end up a figure of fantasy. Yet the Hollywood virus still binds to all available receptors. Paltrow selects herself as patient zero by choosing to be (i) a working mom who (ii) abandons her family to fly overseas (iii) to Asian countries with dodgy food and hygiene on behalf of (iv) a corporation whose logging activity proves in the final minutes to trigger the virus' original species-jump from bat to pig to human; and if all that's not enough to damn her, (v) she cheats with a former beau on the stopover home, thus incidentally allowing the state of Illinois as well as Georgia to support the production generously while the world outside the US borders disappears entirely from interest or even attention. And for all the advocacy of evidence-based statistical rationality, we never see a single character recover from the infection, despite what we're told is a survival rate of 75%: if you start coughing, you're dead, or at least not in the film any more. If you want to stay alive as an American, it's safest just not to go out. And stop touching your face! Whatever Kate says, it looks really weird when you see actors do it. Now those are people who understand about hygiene.



From this side of the world, David Mackenzie's strange little Glaswegian sick-pic **PERFECT SENSE** takes an opposite perspective on the same scenario in a cheerfully scienceless fable about a global pandemic which takes out the Aristotelian senses one by one, each time preceded by a surge of one of the

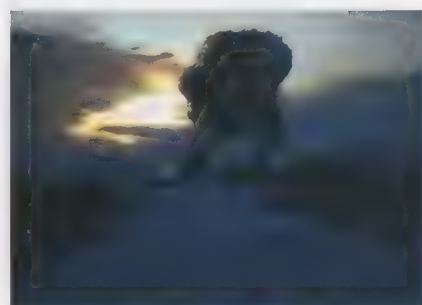
more generally accepted basic emotions. Despite Eva Green's character being an epidemiologist, she doesn't seem to do any actual epidemiology, her role confined instead to romancing and redeeming Ewan McGregor's amiably hedonistic chef while the human race inexplicably loses its senses of smell, taste, hearing, and finally sight in a series of waves announced by extreme bursts of acting (grief, fear, rage, and guess). Pleasingly for a small Scottish film, the rest of the world does at least get a look-in through "stringer units" in Mexico, Kenya, and India; but the sensory apocalypse is all rather genteel, with its citizens coping with the collapse by memorising Burns and

scoffing a lot of upmarket Scots nouvelle cuisine. A Scandinavian co-production with something called Trust Nordisk, whose logo is a glacier-mint polar bear looking rather forlorn on a shrunken Pan-Am globe, it has a Danish writer and a distinctly flattering vision of Glasgow that feels more like a forcibly transhumed Copenhagen in its improbable civility and relentlessly bourgeois tastefulness. It's not clear whether we're meant to think the sense of touch is going to go at the end, in which case humanity is well and truly bugged. But since the Aristotelian canon of five senses is notoriously outmoded and incomplete, maybe we'll just lose the sense of rectal interoception and never notice.



*Perfect Sense* shares one of its production companies with the season's other whacked-out Nordic apocalypse movie, Lars von Trier's lushly preposterous **MELANCHOLIA**. This goes still further in the gentrification of armageddon by viewing the destruction of Earth (through collision with an eponymous Neptune-sized rock giant that's "been hiding behind the sun") from the vantage of a pair of posh sisters in a castle on a Swedish island after Kirsten Dunst's expensive wedding collapses as a result of her depression. A bizarre, beguiling, phenomenally silly pantomime horse of a film, it articulates at the midpoint from its Dunst-centred front half reenacting Altman's *A Wedding* to dress its back end around Charlotte Gainsbourg's character in an epicly barmy arthouse version of *Knowing*, as the cast ebbs away and the cowardly male adults in turn do a runner, leaving the sisters to come to terms with the end of humanity and the lifting of Dunst's depression as her visions come true. The universal tropes

of apocalypse cinema – international units, rolling newscasts, mass panic – are purposely banished, as indeed is any regard for the laws of physics. Kiefer Sutherland, as the patronising voice of masculine scientific reason, gets to deliver lines like "It's taking part of our atmosphere, and for a little while it'll make us winded" and "It's rising again, like the moon, because of the Earth's rotation, just like they said it would." (Yeah, I'm an astrophysicist, me.) But this time the internet is right and science is wrong, and the girls are left to reflect on the end from their radically bipolar perspectives: "The Earth is evil. We don't have to grieve for it. Nobody will miss it." "But where will Leo grow up?" Gainsbourg is if anything even better than the Cannes-crowned Dunst, and it's no small achievement that the film manages to remain irresistible right to the end after ostentatiously dumping its gold in the opening sequence. But one's sympathies can't help drifting to beleaguered rationalist Sutherland and his exasperated catchphrase "Unbelievable!"



A less elegantly costumed side to Scandinavian heritage tourism is shown in Norwegian mockdoc **TROLLHUNTER**, a refreshing experiment in found-footage comedy that follows the Norsk wildlife board's secret troll exterminator in action as he tries to keep the world from discovering the offputting truth of dimwitted titans stalking the stunningly gorgeous wilderness parks. Deadpan CG monster comedy and witty rationalisation of traditional troll lore alternate amusingly with low-key bureaucratic satire, as it becomes increasingly apparent that what the crew hail as "true Norwegian hero" is an underresourced state employee who hates his job, and the associated paperwork, as much as every other low-paid, unappreciated civil servant in a dead-end gig with horrible hours in miserable conditions: "There's nothing heroic about what I do. It's shitty work." The scenery is lovely, and the film has the entirely intended effect of making Norway look as attractive a destination in real life as the government conspires to present it – though in the light of the summer's main Norwegian story, there's an unplanned glimpse of something more chilling in the casual availability of hunting weapons to the citizenry.



Some of the same themes of conspiracy and coverup emerge in another adventurous attempt to refresh the overworked found-footage genre in **APOLLO 18**, which documents a secret followup moon mission in 1972 to investigate something nasty on the surface.

Stylistically, the execution is wonderful, with genuine NASA footage expertly interleaved with loving recreations of the iconic Apollo camerawork and era, and it's surprisingly moving to watch new moon-landing footage in the classic late-Apollo style of Gene Cernan and Jack Schmitt,

while the unsurprising revelation that the Russians have also been busier than they admitted is realised with some evocative period design of its own (no doubt guided in part by the stylistic eye of producer Timur Bekmambetov). By dramatic requirement the astronauts are rather less professional and unflappable than anyone in the real-life Apollo programme, and the progressive degradation of image and sound as cameras get smashed pushes the limits of watchability to an exhausting degree, while the actual nature of the lunar mystery is a bit rubbish and the conspiracy plotting fairly clonking. It doesn't help that the entire film was effectively done, with much higher production values, in the first five minutes of *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*. But the lo-fi style of the Apollo cameras works nicely as a medium of grainy suspense, even if it beggars imagining how some of this footage is supposed to have made it back to Earth and on to the internet; and there's a neat sting in the final titles to give the story some residual sense of threat forty years on.



Memories of the early seventies are stirred by Woody Allen's bafflingly successful **MIDNIGHT IN PARIS**, which sees Owen Wilson's disaffected screenwriter timeslip back to twenties Paris where his tiresome Woody-channelling self-doubt proves inexplicably charming to Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Dalí, Picasso, and Eliot – as well as to the more or less obligatory Marion

Cotillard, here incarnating a fictional serial muse to Modigliani, Braque, Picasso, and Hemingway. "When it comes to his writing," says discontented fiancée Rachel McAdams, "he has no respect for anyone else's opinion"; and that's certainly the case with the hero's maker, whose ability to write dialogue seems to have succumbed to prostate complications somewhere around *Vicky Christina Barcelona*. States of mind

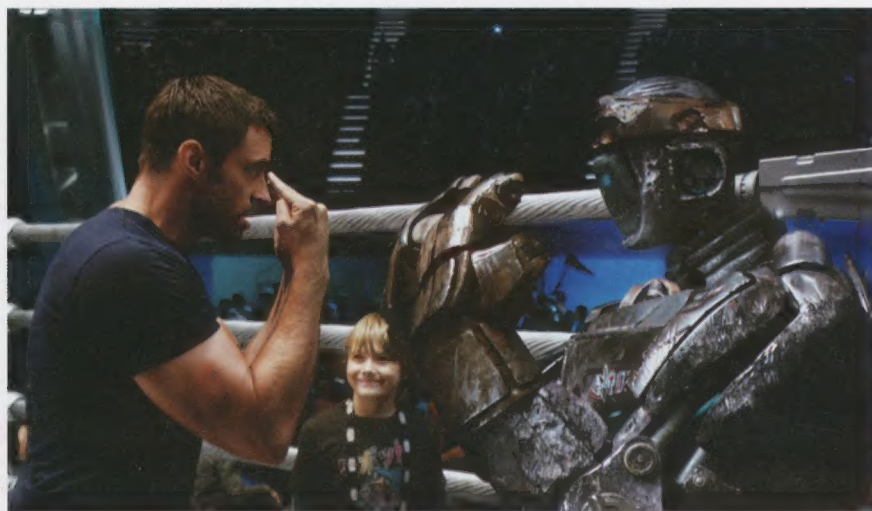
are told, not shown; all the characters speak as if they're talking to their therapists. ("As a writer I'm pretty good at picking up on vibrations from women, and I get the feeling you have some complicated feelings for me.") There's one genuinely funny routine where he pitches *The Exterminating Angel* to a bemused Buñuel, who doesn't get it at all: "I don't understand. What's holding them in the room?" Perhaps that's the spirit in which the timeslip device should be read, since its plotting is otherwise simply shoddy: at one point Wilson finds Cotillard's subsequently published diary of their encounters, which includes a timeslip-free account of the night that follows, and includes a development which would seem to guarantee that the account could never have been written in the first place. The whole thing promises a fantasy of Paris which finds endless inexplicable personal and erotic fascination in ineffably tiresome, self-absorbed, shallow Americans who profess a spiritual connection with the city without actually feeling bothered to learn the language. When Stein reads a draft of his novelisation of his life-crisis (apparently not noticing that it's word-processed), she commends it in anachronically Gernsbackian terms: "In a way, it's almost like science fiction." In its almost kind of way, it almost is.



A more familiar dramatisation of male midliferhood comes in body-swap bromcom **THE CHANGE-UP**, which showcases some of the faces of Atlanta less visible in *Contagion* – notably a magic fountain of

Justice into which you can micturate and make a wish, resulting in the hilarifluent transcorporation of swingin' party animal Ryan Reynolds and workaholic family man Jason Bateman into one another's

bodies and lives. Like 2009's *Hot Tub Time Machine*, its ventures into gross-out adult humour don't quite succeed in masking a deep anxiety about masculinity and success and an ultimately conservative reassurance of traditional roles and values. The opportunity to cheat sexually is passed over on both sides; instead Bateman learns to chill and prioritise family, while Reynolds learns the satisfaction of sustained commitment, and both emerge with their monogamous bond as lifelong masculine besties intact, renewing their vows at the end with a solemn "I love you". Though the film itself treats women fairly contemptibly, both leads are essentially painfully decent guys, to the extent that neither character is terribly convincing as the other because they're fairly interchangeable from the start, and the body-swap premise becomes less about the exchange of lives than about the opportunity to hear the home truths that nobody will tell you to your face, like what your father really thinks of you and what your wife really wants. I very much doubt she wants to see this film.

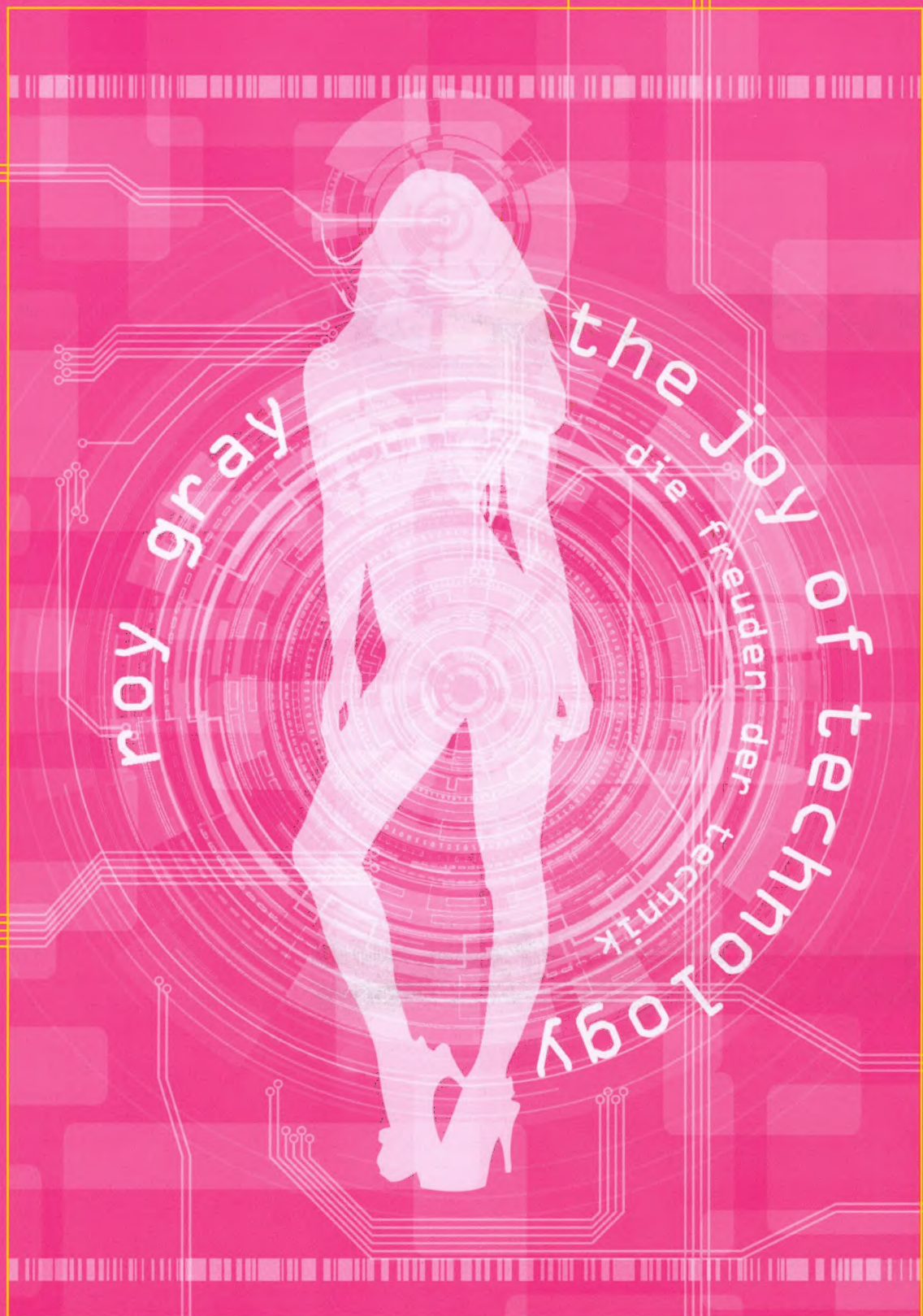


When Richard Matheson first saw **REAL STEEL**, distantly adapted from his 1956 *F&SF* novella 'Steel' by way of his 1963 *Twilight Zone* episode, he thought the boxing robots were stuntmen in suits. You can't blame him for being unduly influenced by the memory of the actual story, the entire point of which was that the punched-out human boxer has to don his robot's suit himself to fight (and lose) a crucial bout in the new world of posthuman contact sports. But *Real Steel* is a film from deep inside the new Hollywood, with Spielberg and Zemeckis producing, and has a rather different

take on the displacement of humans by machines in the future of spectacle entertainment. Now Hugh Jackman's character is a commitment-phobic bot operator who finds himself saddled overnight with a ten-year-old Spielberg tyke, his son by a conveniently abandoned mom now peremptorily deceased, all ready to bond through a common love of punching the lights out of remote-controlled machine avatars, the only parenting skill a modern father needs. Together they build an unstoppable cybernetic hybrid of *Rocky* and *The Champ* out of old-school parts from the future

equivalent of the seventies, and take on the world champion as plucky underdogs in a title bout watched by every character in the film as the tears roll down their faces at Jackman's direction of his mechanical surrogate by live motion capture: "a style, some would call it humanlike, that bot fighting has rarely seen!" But if *Real Steel* is on this level a film about filmmaking in a world of expanding technologies, it's also a film about parenting in the robotic imagination of Hollywood, which views our offspring as soft fleshy analogues to the machines we have to nurture and train for combat in the world. So long as you ensure their moms are safely dead and you can trade them in for a younger, hotter, more thanklessly devoted model who's also a dab hand with a welding torch in the body shop, kids don't grieve for the only parent they've ever known. All you have to do is to show them that they don't have to go to Paris with a wealthy, stable aunt-and-uncle couple who adore them, when you can offer a blue-collar road-trip Midwestern staycation enjoying a traditional American mix of violent sports, popular mechanics, and underage gambling. All a boy needs from his dad is a ringside seat in court: "I want you to fight for me. That's all I ever wanted." Right. Kids like to be fought over, and love is what a boy feels for his robot. Tell that one to the judge.

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